

GEORGES SIMENON

Betty



PENGUIN
CLASSICS



Georges Simenon

B E T T Y

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ



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About the Author

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903 and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. He wrote *Betty* in 1960 on his return from a few weeks' convalescence in Versailles.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

Betty

‘I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov’

– William Faulkner

‘A truly wonderful writer ... marvellously readable – lucid, simple,
absolutely in tune with the world he creates’

– Muriel Spark

‘Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the bleakness of
human life’

– A. N. Wilson

‘One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century ... Simenon was
unequalled at making us look inside, though the ability was masked by his
brilliance at absorbing us obsessively in his stories’

– *Guardian*

‘A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part of it’

– Peter Ackroyd

‘The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in literature’

– André Gide

‘Superb ... The most addictive of writers ... A unique teller of tales’

– *Observer*

‘The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all their
disconcerting complexity’

– Anita Brookner

‘A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined a high literary reputation with popular appeal’

– P. D. James

‘A supreme writer ... Unforgettable vividness’

– *Independent*

‘Compelling, remorseless, brilliant’

– John Gray

‘Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century’

– John Banville



‘Would you like something to eat?’

She shook her head. The voice sounded unnatural, as if someone were speaking to her through a windowpane.

‘Mind you, when I say something to eat, that means rabbit because, as you can see from looking around, today is rabbit day. Too bad if you don’t like it. When it’s cod day, there’s only cod ...’

It was strange hearing the syllables follow on from one another, connecting, forming words, sentences, rather like yarn that gradually transforms itself into lace, or wool into a knitted sock.

That image of a knitted sock, half-finished, dangling from its three needles, made her smile. It was surprising to think of such a common object here, opposite a man who visibly prided himself on his sophistication and who constructed his sentences so meticulously. He was dressed in grey. He was all grey: his eyes, his hair, his skin, even his tie and shirt. There wasn’t a dash of colour. And, listening to him, she had just imagined a sock, not grey but black, because she had only ever seen black socks being knitted, a very long time ago, in the Vendée, when she was not yet fourteen. And now she was twenty-eight ...

‘One gets used to it.’

She almost asked him:

‘Used to what?’

Because her mind was wandering in several directions at once. She couldn’t grasp the connection between what one needed to get used to and the woollen sock, forgetting that the sock was in her memory and not in that

of her companion. All the same, the man must have been able to read the question on her face because he continued undeterred, with touching diligence:

‘Liking or not liking.’

Liking what? She had forgotten the rabbit and the cod. Once again, her eyes met those of an American officer sitting on a stool at the bar. He kept staring at her and she wondered where she had seen him before.

‘Wednesday is cassoulet day, although it would be more accurate to say cassoulet night.’

From her companion’s wan smile she guessed that there was a subtle distinction and she wished she could comprehend what he meant.

‘Are you partial to it?’

Partial? This conversation, which she no longer understood at all, was becoming increasingly absurd. Everything was confused. But too bad. She said solemnly:

‘Yes.’

She had no idea what he was talking about exactly, but she didn’t wish to be rude. She didn’t know this overdressed man with a fascinatingly penetrating gaze. She wasn’t aware of his name. Even so, she was actually closer to him than she had ever been to anyone else, because, apart from him, there was nothing left in the world.

Unbelievable as it seemed, that was the way things were. This would last as long as it would last – an hour or a night, or longer. And that thought made her smile. A smile which, for the time being, was without bitterness. He was very polite. In the car, he hadn’t tried to fondle her and he hadn’t asked her a single question.

Because she remembered the car, the soft, cool leather of the seats and the rain on the windscreen, and the misted-up windows on which she idly drew pictures with her fingertips. In the city, she recalled the lights concentrated into each drop of water, then the headlamps on the motorway. She could have described in the minutest detail everything that had happened since, as if before an investigating magistrate or a doctor ...

Since when? Since the bar in Rue de Ponthieu, in any case. Casting her mind back further was too unpleasant and she refused to do so. She didn’t want to ruin something that had been so difficult to achieve and was even more difficult to hold on to: that state of precise balance, or rather of perfect

vacillation, which was hers for the time being, a pleasant floating feeling, relaxing, almost blissful.

Not blissful in the usual sense of the word, naturally. She didn't feel like laughing or dancing or telling stories. The thrilling thing was that she knew nothing, nothing of what would come next, not that night, or tomorrow or the following days, and she didn't care one bit.

'I'm surprised that people who eat animals every day don't wonder ...'

She listened, gazing at the face of the man, which she saw as if through a magnifying glass, but, despite her efforts, other thoughts were going round inside her head.

Before leaving Rue de Ponthieu, she should have asked her companion to wait for her for a moment so she could go down to the toilet, where the attendant would probably have had a pair of stockings to sell her. Most of them do.

It upset her to have a ladder on each leg. For the first time in her life, she hadn't changed her stockings for ages. Two days? Three days? She would rather not be reminded. Nor had she taken a bath, which would bother her later. Would there be a bathtub, and would he let her use it?

She glimpsed faces, close up or far away, hair, eyes, noses, mouths moving, and she could hear voices that didn't always come from those mouths. She tried to fathom, without much success, what kind of place she was in. Without thinking, she grabbed her glass of whisky:

'Cheers!'

There was a blonde woman, a barmaid with big breasts like she had so desperately wanted when she was a little girl. There was also an African in a white hat who would appear, smiling, sometimes through one door, sometimes through the other, whom everyone seemed to know. There was the American officer propped up at the bar, clutching his glass and still staring at her.

Some people were eating and others were simply drinking, some in groups, others alone, staring straight ahead in silence.

'Has it never occurred to you that, as a result, we are full of animals?'

She was conscious that she was drunk. She had been drunk for a long time but, for now, she was taking advantage of a promising punter. She didn't feel unwell, nor did she feel like vomiting or crying. Was her companion drunk too? Had he already been drinking before they met at Le Ponthieu?

He had simply walked in from the dark street, with raindrops on the tweed of his clothes. There too, he was a regular: you could tell from the way he looked around and greeted the bartender with a wave.

She'd been sitting on a stool and he asked permission to sit next to her.

'Be my guest.'

His hands were long and white, very dry, and he fiddled with them all the time as if they were foreign objects.

He didn't know where she had come from or what she had drunk beforehand. Maybe he hadn't noticed the ladders in her stockings? At all events, he couldn't guess that she hadn't taken a bath, that she hadn't even been able to wash after the man that afternoon.

They weren't in Rue de Ponthieu any more. She didn't know where they were. She had only recognized Avenue de Versailles, where she'd half glimpsed her mother's house, then they'd taken the motorway and turned right on to a muddy track. On alighting from the car, she caught the smell of wet leaves and jumped over a puddle. She still had water in her left shoe.

They were in a restaurant, because people were eating. It was also a bar. There was muffled music from a turntable that no one was listening to. And yet she had the impression that this wasn't an establishment like any other and that everyone was staring at her.

All those people, including the American officer, seemed to know one another, even though, and especially, because they weren't conversing, and the owner was going from one table to the next, sitting down for a moment, he too keeping his eyes on her. Her hair wasn't dishevelled. She didn't have a smudge on her nose. Her suit was more than decent. Her stockings weren't, but that happened to all women.

Maybe she should have been introduced, approved? Or maybe she had to pass some test?

'Everything all right, doctor?'

The owner, this time, but remaining on his feet, was addressing her companion, who batted his eyelids without bothering to reply and glanced again at his hands placed flat on the table. Then he began methodically to scratch the skin between his fingers.

'You're not listening to me ...'

He was talking to her, because the owner had already moved off.

'I assure you I'm listening.'

'What was I saying?'

‘That as a result of eating animals ...’

He stared fixedly at her and she wondered if that was the correct answer. She must have annoyed him, because he rose to his feet, mumbling:

‘Would you excuse me for a moment?’

He strode towards one of the doors. The owner took the opportunity to come over and collect the two empty glasses.

‘The same again?’

She had the feeling she’d seen him before as well. It was a fixation, this evening. Not only when it came to people, but also things. All this reminded her of something. But when? Where?

‘Is this the first time you’ve been to Le Trou?’

‘Yes.’

She didn’t know that this place was called Le Trou and she wondered whether naming it ‘the pit’ was a prank, or a trap, and whether she’d been wrong to reply seriously.

‘Have you known the doctor long?’

‘No.’

‘Do you not wish to eat?’

‘No, thank you. I’m not hungry.’

‘Make yourself at home. Everyone’s at home here.’

She smiled to thank him for speaking to her and, for appearance’s sake, drank half of her glass, opened her bag and powdered her nose. Her face was puffy. She preferred not to study it in the mirror of her compact, which at the same time reflected a very dark-haired, and above all very tall, woman sitting behind her.

‘When you know the place better, you won’t be able to stay away.’

Her companion, looking strangely intense, had resumed his seat opposite her.

‘Forgive me for leaving you on your own.’

She tried, without any success, to hear what the people behind her were saying, convinced they were talking about her. She in turn rose, murmuring:

‘Would you excuse me?’

On reaching the toilet, she found herself face to face with the African, who stared at her and laughed a great silent laugh, as if it were funny meeting her suddenly in a narrow passage. He didn’t do anything to her, however, and stepped aside, laughing even harder. She glimpsed a filthy,

messy kitchen. A door that didn't close properly divided it from the toilet, whose skylight had a view over the countryside.

She was beginning to feel impatient, for no particular reason. Perhaps also a little afraid. It was time for another drink to keep herself afloat, before she was overwhelmed by anxiety or sadness.

When she went back into the restaurant, before even sitting down, she downed the rest of her whisky.

'I'm thirsty!' she sighed.

Her companion called:

'Joseph! Bring madame a drink.'

'Same again?'

She said yes.

'For you too, doctor?'

'If you like.'

Once more, she wanted things to move fast, wanted to be lying down, alone or otherwise, anywhere, and to close her eyes. She found the music and the din exhausting. She had had enough of seeing faces, eyes staring at her as if she were a freak or an interloper.

'Why do you keep scratching?'

She was definitely one step behind.

'Me?' she asked in surprise, after what felt like an age.

Perhaps she'd scratched the back of her hand without realizing. But the man seized her hand with a contained eagerness and his face suddenly lit up with childlike jubilation.

'It's here, isn't it?'

He pointed to an invisible spot.

'Yes ... I suppose ...'

'Under your skin?'

Now he was frightening her and again she replied yes, so as not to vex him.

'Does it crawl?'

'Does what crawl?'

'Does it move around on the surface or deep down? It's very important, because they all have their own characteristics. I know some that ...'

'What are you talking about?'

'Worms.'

'What worms?'

‘So you’re not aware that you have worms under your skin, all sorts of worms, tiny ones and huge ones, fat and thin, wriggly and docile? You probably have other little creatures that are much more inconspicuous. I’ll show them to you and explain their nature ...’

She could see close up the thin, pallid face, the smooth grey hair and the eyes almost the same grey, and it suddenly dawned on her that there was something abnormal about him. She wanted to withdraw her hand; she tried, but he was gripping it firmly.

‘You’re going to see how I hunt down these creatures that torment us so diabolically ...’

With his free hand, he took from his pocket a gold toothpick with a sharp point.

‘Don’t be afraid. I’ve had a lot of practice.’

A voice said:

‘Leave her alone, doctor.’

He still tried to prick her skin.

‘I told you to leave her alone.’

‘I’m just going to remove a little worm that’s bothering her and ...’

The owner took another step forward and placed an amiable hand on the doctor’s shoulder.

‘Come with me for a moment.’

‘In a minute. She asked me—’

‘Come.’

‘Why?’

‘A private message.’

The grey man looked up, hesitant.

‘Are you afraid I’ll hurt her? You’re forgetting that I ...’

His smile was bitter, resigned, even though he was tall and the owner short and stocky. A second later, he was on his feet, toothpick in hand and, humiliated, he allowed himself to be nudged towards the back door.

Perturbed and anxious, Betty looked at her hand, drained her glass, then, with a shrug, that of her companion too. She still didn’t know who he was. She knew nothing. She no longer knew anything and was beginning to feel panic-stricken. The American officer at the bar was watching her, unsmiling, morose.

‘Waiter!’

‘Yes, madame.’

‘Give me a drink.’

This time, he didn’t ask her if she wanted the same again. She wanted it fast. The faster the better. The images became fuzzy. There was ginger hair, for example, which might have been very close to her or at the back of the room, and she didn’t know if it belonged to a woman or to a man. She struggled to focus her eyes and then she saw frozen, indifferent faces that could have been wax figures.

People resented her but she couldn’t understand why.

She must have done something wrong, broken the rules of the establishment.

How could she have done otherwise, since she didn’t know what those rules were?

Why didn’t anyone explain them to her?

It wasn’t her drinking that was causing offence. The proof was that the owner himself had called Joseph the first time, and others were drinking as much if not more than her. A young woman with mousey hair on the corner of a banquette was deathly pale, her head lolling back, and her companion, who was holding her hand romantically, did not appear to be paying any attention to her.

What would happen if Betty began to shout? She was tempted to do so, to find out, to stir things up, so that someone would take notice of her, not just stare at her.

And supposing she blurted out everything she’d done over the past three days? Would those faces finally take on a human expression? Would there be compassion, or simply a flicker of interest, in all those fish eyes?

Her hand trembled as she rummaged in her bag.

‘Waiter!’

‘Yes, madame. The same again?’

Which proved once more that it wasn’t the drinking that was the problem!

‘Do you have any cigarettes?’

‘One moment.’

An engine could be heard outside, a car that sounded as if its wheels were stuck in the mud. A voice said:

‘Mario will drive him home.’

Betty didn’t realize at first that those words were addressed to her, because they were spoken behind her back. Almost at the same time, she

became aware of a woman's hand offering her a cigarette.

She half turned. The tall brunette, who had a white streak in her hair, was standing there with one hand on the chair where the doctor had sat.

'May I?' she asked.

She had a husky voice and grey pearls around her neck. Perhaps the last whisky had been one too many, because the images were becoming less and less clear, like that afternoon in the hotel room, even before the man had put his clothes back on. She hadn't seen him leave. He could have taken her handbag, her clothes. He could have strangled her, and she would have been incapable of giving his description. Of course, if she'd been strangled. But

...

She was getting muddled. The sounds were all confused. Her body, on the chair, started swaying and she was unable to stop it. If she swayed a little harder, she would fall on to the floor amid the feet and cigarette butts. Then she would be very dirty indeed!

'Did he frighten you?'

Who? Why? It was as if she had already forgotten the man in grey.

'He's a charming fellow, a decent man, even.'

The woman had brought her glass with her.

'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

'I hope you realized that he takes drugs? When he left you earlier, it was to get his fix, and that wasn't the first time this evening. Do you know him?'

'No.'

'His name is Bernard. He used to be a doctor in Versailles.'

Doctor in Versailles. She could still hear, still grasp the meaning of the words. What eluded her was what those words had to do with her. Why was she being told this, earnestly, as if it was important or dramatic? The woman was bound to have noticed the ladders in her stockings. Perhaps she'd also seen that she wasn't very clean under her make-up?

She had lovely brown squirrel eyes and her low, gravelly voice was comforting.

Betty tried to close her eyes so as to concentrate, but had to open them again immediately because everything began to spin.

'I'm thirsty ...' she murmured.

The woman gave her a glass, her own or another, who cared?

‘Have you eaten?’

‘I think so.’

‘Are you not hungry?’

‘No.’

‘Would you like to get some air?’

‘No.’

She couldn’t, because she was incapable of walking. If she tried to stand up, she was certain to fall over. She would fall over anyway, sooner or later, but she would rather it didn’t happen when she was still conscious.

What did it matter where she came round, in hospital or elsewhere? And it would be even better for everyone if she didn’t come round at all. She truly thought that. She wasn’t sad. She had long gone beyond sadness.

‘Alan has taken quite a fancy to you. He hasn’t taken his eyes off you since you arrived, and he doesn’t realize that he’s on his eighth Scotch.’

Betty tried to smile, like a well-bred person listening politely.

‘I can hear Mario coming back.’

She too heard an engine, then the slamming of a car door and the patter of rain during the short time the restaurant door remained open. In what car ... There was a problem. If Mario had taken the doctor’s car ...

‘Did you manage to get him into bed?’

‘His wife helped me.’

‘He didn’t protest too much?’

‘He’s already counting the rabbits that have invaded his bedroom.’

She saw that they exchanged a glance that concerned her, and that the brunette gave a slight shrug as if to say it wasn’t serious. It didn’t bother her and she didn’t try to guess what they were plotting.

She repeated, for no reason:

‘Rabbits ...’

And, thinking it was a question, they explained:

‘When he’s like this, he sees all sorts of animals around him, not to mention the little creatures teeming beneath his skin, which he tries to remove with his toothpick. When he was still practising, towards the end, he would tell his patients that all their diseases came from those invisible creepy-crawlies, which he was convinced he could rid them of ...’

Who? What? Rid them of what? It was too late now. One drink less, or one less sip perhaps, and she could have kept up her earlier elation.

She was hurting. Nowhere! All over! She was dirty. She was miserable. And there was no one, no one in the world. She had signed. She had given them away. Not even given away: sold, because she'd taken the cheque. A document in due form, the terms of which the notary had dictated over the telephone.

I the undersigned, Élisabeth Étamble ...

She'd had to start again on another sheet, because at first she had written Betty.

I the undersigned, Élisabeth Étamble, née Fayet, aged 28, of no known profession, residing at 22A, Avenue de Wagram, in Paris, hereby recognize that ...

How could she not have recognized, since it was true and she had been caught red-handed?

Her glass was empty again. It was always empty. She cast around for the waiter, slightly ashamed to be ordering a drink in front of this stranger.

'I need to get sloshed,' she explained.

She added, because of the vulgar expression she'd used:

'Excuse me.'

'I know how it feels.'

She knew nothing. Never mind.

'The same again, waiter.'

And she suddenly launched into a garbled explanation, missing out syllables the way a person misses a step on a staircase:

'Actually, I'd never met him before. We were introduced earlier by friends in a bar ...'

They hadn't been introduced, any more than the man of that afternoon, or of the previous day. Why did she feel compelled to make things up? Because it was a woman sitting opposite her?

Anyway, the woman didn't believe her, it was obvious. She nodded as if in agreement, but it was out of politeness, because she had good manners.

The pale girl was asleep in her corner of the banquette, and her companion, who had managed to free his hand, was chatting with the owner and smoking a cigarette.

For Betty, things would not be so straightforward. First of all, there was no one to hold her hand. And secondly, she was going to be sick. It was just a matter of minutes, she knew. Her upper body swayed more and more, to the point where she surreptitiously gripped the table to steady herself.

‘Do you live around here?’

She shook her head, taking care not to shake it too hard.

‘In Paris?’

Not in Paris either, nor elsewhere. She lived nowhere. Why was this woman persisting? If she hadn’t sat down at her table, the American would probably have come over. He must have a car waiting outside. He would have taken Betty somewhere where there was a bed. He might have questioned her too, but with him she’d have said whatever came into her head and he would have been sympathetic.

Besides, perhaps with him she wouldn’t have been sick, if only out of human respect, and also because at last she would have had a bath.

She didn’t know what time it was. She hadn’t known the time for three days and three nights; daylight and darkness no longer had any meaning. It was all a blur.

The dark-haired woman facing her was talking in a low voice, and it sounded the same as prayers in a church.

‘To your left, the bald man smoking a cigar is an English lord who has an estate in Louveciennes. Every night ...’

This woman had to be twenty years older than her. She seemed to have lived a lot, known all sorts of people, especially strange characters.

‘Madame!’ she suddenly blurted out.

She hadn’t planned it. She’d wanted to shout to her for help, say to her, for example:

‘Hold me! ... Do something ...’

If only it could stop! If only she could stop thinking! If someone could hold her hand, make her sleep, watch over her while she slept, if only someone, some human being, could be there when she opened her eyes again.

Had she really spoken? Had sounds come out of her throat? She was almost certain she’d said:

‘Madame!’

But no one asked any questions. No one asked anything. There was no surprise, no curiosity on the face opposite her. And yet she wasn’t in a

hospital or an asylum where you see patients sit up in bed to call for help, was she?

She was in a bar. Men and women were drinking. Although her vision was hazy, they were there, and the sounds of the glasses clinking, the music from the turntable and the voices were real.

Then it felt as if communication between her and the others had been cut off, that they couldn't hear her, or rather that, for some unknown reason, they didn't want to hear her.

She was among them, but her existence was no more visible than that afternoon, when she had been walking the streets. People just passed her by. Some brushed against her, sometimes jostling her, but not a single person noticed that she was a living being.

'Do you understand?'

She had written the letter, all the words that had been dictated to her. She had signed. She made an effort to write Élisabeth instead of Betty. She'd stuffed the cheque into her bag and it was probably still there. She had ...

It was too much. She couldn't go on. Her hand groped for the glass on the table. Clumsily, she knocked it on to the floor and it shattered on the red tiles.

She began:

'I'm so ...'

She wanted to say:

'I'm sorry.'

Instead, she clenched her fists and howled:

'No! No! No! And no!'

It was over. O-ver! There's a limit to everything. She was conscious that everyone was looking at her now, but she could see no one in particular, nothing but a sea of expressionless faces.

'You don't care, do you?'

She tried to laugh, but was sobbing at the same time. She attempted to stand up and fell over, but she didn't shatter like the glass. There was a table leg an inch from her nose, chair legs all around her, men's and women's feet.

She was ashamed of behaving badly and, if she'd had the strength, she would have apologized. She knew that it was not done, that she was sozzled, that she shouldn't have had that last drink.

The table and chairs were moving away from her. She was being held by the shoulders. Her feet were dragging and she recognized the piles of dirty plates in the kitchen. She was sure that the African was there. She tried to spot him, but couldn't.

Someone was speaking, but she didn't attempt to understand what they were saying. She moaned softly, because she really was in pain.

'Have you got a gauze bandage?'

'There must be one up there in the dresser drawer.'

'What do we do with her?'

'What do you think?'

'I'll take her with me.'

'You?'

'Why not?'

'To the Carlton?'

She felt a sharper pain in her hand when someone disinfected the cut from a shard of glass.

'Do you think she needs a doctor?'

'What for?'

'Are you fit to drive?'

'Just carry her to my car.'

She thought she was unconscious. She didn't realize that she was taking everything in, that she would discover the words in her memory, with the inflections, the noises from the restaurant, the kitchen, even the smell of the rabbit mingled with that of alcohol and cigarettes.

She was aware of the taste of rain on her lips, of odours – the smell of the car, of her damp hair, the whiff of cows coming from somewhere.

'Watch out when you reverse.'

'Yes.'

'You can go another two metres ... Go ... Stop! ...'

The car gave a violent lurch and the dark-haired woman lit her cigarette with one hand.

Rain. Trees. Lights. Cobblestones.

Then a gate with tall white columns and two men in blue uniforms who came rushing over.

'Give number 53 to my friend, who isn't very well.'

Her head lolled, inert, as she was carried, and a lift gently began to ascend.



Her eyelashes fluttered but her eyelids wouldn't open wide enough for her to see anything. At the same time, the pout disappeared from her lips and her hand, with a lazy, vague movement, brushed back her hair, which was covering almost her entire face, tickling her cheek.

Refusing to waken, she curled up, seeking the comfort of her own warmth, her smell, the blood flowing through her veins, the regular intake of breath in her nostrils, which narrowed with each inhalation.

Unwittingly she had adopted the foetal position, as if to offer less of a purchase, to form a closed entity, perfectly unified, unassailable.

She already knew many things that she did not really want to know and she was deliberately putting them out of her mind, into what was once called limbo.

As a child, she used to play an amusing, sometimes sensual game that helped her achieve that floating feeling, especially when confined to bed with flu or a slight fever.

Today, maintaining that state of quasi-innocence felt like a need, a vital necessity.

She had a headache, not too bad, not as bad as she might have expected, a dull pain, the intensity and nature of which she could alter by burrowing further into the pillow.

She was thirsty. Maybe there was some water on the bedside table, but to drink it she would have had to emerge from her torpor, open her eyes and face reality.

She preferred to stay thirsty. There was an aftertaste in her mouth that reminded her of the first time she gave birth, when she'd been so frightened and had been given injections to numb her. Now too, all her mucous membranes were sensitive, almost painful, and there were moments when she had the impression they were swelling, that her entire body was swelling, becoming so light that it was floating in space.

She'd been given an injection last night, she remembered very clearly.

'You may leave us, Lucien.'

'Are you sure you don't need anything? Would you like me to send in the chambermaid?'

The room she was in hadn't been aired for several days and it smelled fusty. Not the bland fustiness of a town, but the damp-hay smell of the countryside. When, a little earlier, the concierge and the porter had wanted to turn the lights on, the dark-haired woman had said:

'No! She mustn't have too much light. Leave me alone with her. Just open the communicating door into my room.'

The men's footsteps had faded away. Betty was lying on a bed, on top of the covers. The woman had gone off into the adjoining room where, from the noises she made, it sounded as if she was making herself comfortable. Was she afraid that Betty might throw up over her dress or tear it, clutching on to her?

Betty had tried to cheat and open her eyes for a second. She hadn't done so and perhaps, after all, she would have been incapable of it. The dark-haired woman came back, undressed her with expert hands, removing everything, her slip, her bra, her stockings and then, after hesitating, her skimpy sheer nylon panties.

She went into the bathroom and turned on the tap and, with the deftness of a nurse, ran a soapy washing mitt over Betty's face and body, then rinsed it off with warm water and a splash of eau de Cologne.

She said nothing, didn't talk to herself but, from time to time, she absent-mindedly hummed snatches of a tune that had been playing on the turntable most of the evening.

'There you are, my dear!' she sighed at last. *'Now we're going to try to rest and not think about anything.'*

Without moving her, she managed to pull back the covers and slide Betty's body between the fresh, lightly starched sheets.

Did she know that Betty was taking everything in and that she would remember? What was the expression on her face as the woman stared at her for a long while in the light from a single little lamp at the other end of the room?

Betty had not dreamed all that. Nor had she dreamed the words that came back into her head, with their precise intonation, the sounds and smells that went with them:

‘What do you think?’

‘I’ll take her with me.’

‘You?’

‘Why not?’

It was Mario, the owner of Le Trou, and the dark-haired woman who were talking. Betty had been struck by their familiar manner and how they didn’t need to spell things out to understand one another.

‘Are you in a fit state to drive?’

Mario was common, energetic, slightly cheeky. He exuded a quiet strength and, when he sat down at the customers’ tables, he seemed to be taking them under his wing. Had he not appeared at the exact moment when the doctor with his worms was becoming disagreeable and possibly dangerous?

He hadn’t grown angry, hadn’t raised his voice. Firmly, but without violence, he had rid the young woman of him. He’d gone to the trouble of driving him home.

‘Did you manage to get him into bed?’

‘His wife helped me.’

There was no irony in his voice, only a hint of amused mockery when he added:

‘He’s counting the rabbits that have invaded his room.’

Betty looked half-dead. She thought she’d plumbed the depths of despair and yet, at that moment, she wondered whether Mario was the dark-haired woman’s lover or just her friend.

Other images came back to her, clearer, more detailed than when she had seen them in real life, the blonde barmaid, for example, the one with the provocative breasts, who had a huge beauty spot on her cheek and was constantly smoothing her hands over her thighs as if to stop her girdle from riding up. She probably had one of those delicate, milky skins that showed red marks from the elastic and fasteners of her clothes when she undressed.

At one point, the light went out. There was just a faint glow in the room, because the communicating door was open and the dark-haired woman hadn't switched her light off yet. She came and went, smoking. The smell of her cigarette was sharp, different from the usual odour. Water was running into a bathtub.

Betty was genuinely unwell. Her heart thumped irregularly and at times she feared it would not resume its normal rhythm. What would happen then? Would she die? Abruptly, from one moment to the next, before she could realize? She did not call out. She had made up her mind not to call out, to die alone if necessary, and she was glad to know that her body was clean at last. Not completely. Almost. The woman had even run the moist mitt between her toes.

Had she been lying there long? She groaned, was aware of groaning, despite herself, and hoped that it was quiet enough not to be heard.

Especially since the lady was asleep. It was pitch dark. Betty didn't trust her senses any more. Did she really hear slippers gliding over the floor, the breathing of someone coming towards her. Did a warm hand seize her wrist? Did a voice, hers, say:

'I'm scared ...'

'Shhh! ... No need to fret, my dear ...'

Someone was taking her pulse. She could tell that someone was taking her pulse. Not just once, but at least twice, perhaps three times, with intervals of stillness and silence, as at the bedsides of the very sick.

There were no sounds in the hotel, no sounds outside, other than the patter of rain on the louvred shutters, which rattled every so often in the wind. She didn't dare ask for the lamp to be switched on.

A little later, there was some light, not in her room but next door where, for some mysterious reason, a spirit lamp was being lit. She recognized the smell. Her father used to sell methylated spirits. He was a hardware dealer. He was a redhead. He was full of life and would make fun of his customers, imitating them behind their backs. He invented cleaning products. A pity the Germans had shot him at the end of the war. No one had ever known why.

A hand drew back the blanket. Betty felt a needle prick her hip and a liquid seep slowly into her.

Like the first time she'd given birth. The second time, she'd refused. Perhaps it was the same substance. Almost immediately she felt a sense of

well-being, a numbness that still left some regions of her brain alert.

Someone was holding her hand. Her pulse was taken again. She must be perspiring because she could hear the tap running and, a little later, a cold towel was placed on her forehead and over her eyes.

She would have liked to say thank you but, if her lips moved – and she wasn't certain they did – no sound came out.

After that, there was nothing. Then, much later, again there was something that was maybe true and maybe not. It was impossible to decide, because she had a lot of dreams. Why, if it wasn't true, would she have remembered just the one dream, retaining of the others only a painful feeling with no images?

It was towards morning. It must have been morning, because she could hear, in the corridor, the bellhop delivering breakfast to the rooms.

She could have sworn that she'd smelled the aroma of coffee and, when she had opened her eyes – if she had opened them – she'd seen strips of light between the curtains. The day was dawning, or had already dawned.

A noise she tried to identify reached her ears from the next room, whose door was still half-open, dramatic heavy breathing, and she rose to go and see. She had taken a few steps, her head suddenly aching, when, on a bed, she saw two naked bodies making love.

Was it possible that they hadn't heard her, hadn't noticed her, and that she could have tiptoed back to bed and gone back to sleep almost at once?

She couldn't decide. In her mind, the man was Mario and he had a very hairy body. Had that been long ago? Was it already late in the day?

She didn't want to think about it and she tried to sink back into her numbed state and oblivion. Two or three times she saw her father, in his paint-stained white overalls, in the backroom of his shop on Avenue de Versailles, which was cluttered with barrels and gas bottles and reeked of oil and acids.

She had spent her childhood surrounded by that smell, which rose up to their apartment on the first floor and clung to the folds of her father's clothes and his flaming hair.

At school, when she was in her first year, the girl she sat next to, who had a lisp, had asked to move, saying:

'She stinks.'

Her breath resumed a slower, more regular rhythm. Her lips parted over her small teeth, which her mother used to call mouse teeth. Her hand had

gradually slid down her belly and, like when she was a little girl, almost without realizing it, she caressed herself, perhaps to put an even greater distance between herself and the outside world, so that there was nothing but the universe of her warm flesh and her sensations.

She had long since fallen asleep again when a creaking sound made her open her eyes and, this time, she didn't ask herself if she should open them or not. Standing between the door and the bed, she saw the dark-haired woman, in her dressing-gown. She looked even taller than the previous evening.

Had Betty actually seen her standing up, the previous evening? She had just appeared and sat at her table and, later, Betty, her eyes closed, had been incapable of ...

'Did I wake you?'

'I don't know.'

'I came to see if you needed anything. How are you feeling?'

'Fine.'

It was true. Her headache had gone. She was weary, in a pleasant sort of way, with just an emptiness in her chest.

'I think I'm hungry.'

'What would you like to eat?'

She fancied eggs and bacon, perhaps because, whenever she stayed in a hotel, she had eggs and bacon for breakfast. She would never have thought of doing so at home. And besides, her husband ...

She mustn't think about him yet.

'Do you think I can?'

'Why not? I'll call the bellhop.'

'Have you had something to eat?'

'Ages ago.'

'Is it late?'

'Four o'clock.'

'In the afternoon?'

It was a stupid question.

'How do you like your eggs? Well done?'

'Yes.'

'Tea? Coffee?'

'Coffee.'

'With milk?'

‘Black.’

The lady went to the door to give the order to the bellhop.

‘Would you like me to open the shutters?’

She drew the curtains and leaned forward to push open the shutters, and the rain could be seen falling on to the foliage.

‘You gave me an injection, didn’t you?’

‘Did you feel it? Don’t be afraid. My husband was a doctor and, during the twenty-eight years I spent with him, I often acted as his nurse.’

‘Last night I was convinced I was dying.’

She didn’t say that to make the woman feel sorry for her but because she suddenly remembered. It was true. She could have died. Then she would no longer have existed. They would have had to look for her identity card in her bag to find out her name and address. They’d have telephoned Guy. Would he have taken charge of the funeral in spite of everything, or would he have got his brother to deal with it? What would they have told Charlotte?

Instead of that, here she was lying in a plush room with pale blue walls and a bust of Marie-Antoinette on its white marble mantelpiece.

‘Would you like to have a bath before you eat? Knowing Jules, it will take him a good twenty minutes to bring your breakfast. Don’t get up right away. I’ll run your bath.’

She smoked, using a long cigarette holder which Betty hadn’t seen her with the previous night. Her dressing-gown was red velvet, like her slippers, her hair was done and she had her make-up on.

While the bathtub filled, she disappeared into her bedroom for a moment, and came back holding a glass.

‘May I? You won’t be disgusted if I drink in front of you?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘It’s the hour when I begin to crave it. I’m like poor Bernard with his hypodermic needles. The moment comes when we can’t do without.’

Betty wondered if she was talking like this to make her feel at ease, so that she wouldn’t be ashamed of what had happened the night before. She also wondered whether she’d dreamed the scene in the bed, and was increasingly certain that she hadn’t.

‘Your bath is ready. If it bothers you that—’

‘No ...’

Hadn't she undressed her and washed her? And yet, as she got out of bed, she felt a certain shame, because she had the impression that her body was giving off a masculine smell.

Her companion, standing by the window, didn't look at her, didn't follow her into the bathroom, spoke from a distance, like an actor on the stage speaking to the audience in general.

'The water's not too hot?'

'Just right.'

'You're not feeling dizzy?'

'A tiny bit.'

She wasn't quite as in good shape as she'd thought. So long as she had lain still, she hadn't felt any pain, but once on her feet, she'd felt giddy, as well as a sharp pain on one side of her head.

'Do you need anything?'

'No, thank you. I feel bad putting you to all this trouble.'

'Not at all. I'm so ...'

She had nearly said:

'I'm so used to it ...'

She preferred to leave those words unsaid. It was only a little later that she went on:

'I'm so experienced! And with my husband, I saw it all. I hope you're not falling asleep in the water?'

'No.'

'I've put a new toothbrush and toothpaste on the shelf. I always have some. Because, even though this is a hotel, it's my second home. I've been living at the Carlton for three years now. Don't worry about your underwear. I had Louissette, the chambermaid, wash it and she'll bring it to you in a minute.'

There was a knock at the door.

'Put the table here, Jules. And while you're about it, bring me up a large bottle of Perrier.'

Betty wrapped herself in a towelling bathrobe, ran her hands through her hair and went barefoot into the bedroom.

'Wait while I bring you a pair of slippers.'

She felt dizzy and, now that the eggs and bacon were in front of her, she wondered whether she would be able to stomach them.

'Here, put your feet in these. They're too big, but that doesn't matter.'

‘Thank you. I feel awkward not knowing what to call you. It’s as if I’ve known you for a long time already. What’s your name?’

‘Laure. My name is Laure Lavancher. My husband was a professor at the Lyon School of Medicine. When he died, four years ago, I tried to live alone in our apartment and I thought I would soon go mad. I eventually came here, planning to have a rest for two or three weeks. And here I still am.’

‘I’m called Betty.’

‘Enjoy your breakfast, Betty.’

She tried to smile.

‘I’m not sure I’ve got an appetite. I thought I was hungry but now ...’

‘Eat anyway. My husband wouldn’t have allowed you to have anything today, but I know from experience that the doctors ...’

Betty overcame her revulsion, but even the coffee didn’t have the pleasant taste she had hoped for.

‘I was very drunk, wasn’t I?’

‘More to the point, you were unwell.’

‘No! I was dead drunk and I behaved outrageously.’

‘It’s obvious you don’t know Le Trou yet. If you think people even notice these incidents!’

The bellhop returned with the bottle of sparkling water and Laure went to fetch a decanter of whisky from her room.

‘Later, you’ll be allowed some too, as long as your pulse doesn’t start racing again.’

‘Was it fast?’

‘One hundred and forty-three.’

She said the number with a smile, as if in her view it was of no importance. She had given her name, simply, without vanity, more out of politeness and to put the young woman at ease. She had told her why she was there and explained as discreetly as possible her need to drink. On the other hand, she hadn’t asked Betty’s surname and hadn’t asked her any questions about herself yet.

Betty had a strange intuition. She could have sworn that it wasn’t from lack of curiosity that Laure acted in this way, but because she knew. Not the details, for sure, because she couldn’t know about her particular situation. But, all the same, she had understood.

And she avoided coddling her, pitying her, reassuring her.

‘If my cigarette makes you feel sick ...’

‘It doesn’t bother me at all.’

‘Aren’t you eating any more?’

‘I can’t swallow another mouthful.’

‘Would you like me to leave you alone for a moment, to make a phone call maybe, or to write?’

‘No.’

‘Do your belongings need picking up from somewhere?’

How could she have thought of that? She hadn’t said her luggage, but her belongings, as if she’d guessed that this was permanent.

‘I’ll leave you on your own.’

Betty almost shouted:

‘No!’

And, at the same time, she thought she was going to be sick.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘I don’t feel too good.’

‘Nausea?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you’re like me, a sip of pure spirits will set you back to rights. Have you ever tried?’

She nodded.

‘Do you want some?’

Laure poured her a thimbleful of whisky, which she downed in one go, and it almost turned her stomach. She sat still, tense, ready to rush into the bathroom, while a warm glow gradually spread within her chest and relaxed her.

‘Do you feel better?’

She gave a long sigh.

‘Whew! I thought I wouldn’t even have time to get next door.’

‘Do you know where we are?’

‘In Versailles. At the Carlton.’

Laure didn’t ask her how she’d found out or what else she knew.

‘Do you want to stay for a few days and rest?’

‘I don’t want anything.’

It was true. Betty didn’t ask herself any questions. Before her, there was only a void, and she had no reason to be here rather than elsewhere.

‘Listen, Betty. May I call you that instead of saying “madame”?’

Betty glanced instinctively at her wedding ring, which she hadn't thought to remove.

'And you can call me Laure, like everyone else. Besides, at Le Trou, everyone is on first-name terms, and after a certain hour, there are no formalities.'

Was that her way of explaining why she and Mario had been so familiar with each other in the car when they were driving Betty to the hotel? Was she trying to imply that there was nothing between them?

Betty blushed to have had such thoughts, to have recalled the bed scene, real or imagined, that was so vivid in her mind's eye.

'I am open with you as I am with everyone. Last night, I could see you didn't know where to turn and I brought you here because you needed a bed. Don't say anything. Let me finish. For twenty-eight years, I was a happy woman, a respectable middle-class woman from Lyon, whose husband and home were her world. Had I been fortunate enough to have children, I wouldn't be here.'

Betty had no idea how many drinks Laure had had. She spoke without getting carried away, without complacency, and with a conviction that was perhaps slightly over-emphatic, as she herself did after two or three whiskies.

'Now, I consider that my life is over and I no longer exist. Either I'm mistaken about you, or you understand me. I could have shut myself up in my apartment with dignity and waited for it to be over.

'I tried. I drank even more than here and, at one point, I almost lost my mind.

'What I do now, what I experience, what happens to me, no longer matters. Tourists come and go in the hotel, couples hole up here for a few days, old people and convalescents come for a breath of country air and every afternoon they go for their routine little stroll in the grounds.

'I don't notice them any more. A few, seeing me again after several months, greet me as if they know me, or because they assume I'm a member of staff.

'I rarely go down to the dining room and, if I have a drink at the bar to have a chat with Henri, it's usually when there's no one else there.

'I had you put in the room next to mine because I thought you might need looking after—'

'I did need looking after,' broke in Betty timidly.

She was as intimidated as a schoolgirl in front of a new teacher.

‘I am not trying to persuade you either way. If you have to go somewhere else, then do go. If you want to stay another night, or a few more days, or longer, then stay without giving it a second thought and, if you’d prefer a different room ...’

‘No.’

‘Tonight, like last night, like every other night, I’ll be going to Le Trou.’

A suspicion occurred to Betty: was Laure talking like this to stop her thinking about her own problems? Since she’d given her an injection, she had become in her eyes a sort of doctor, and doctors sometimes have tricks like that.

‘Was it your first time there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did anything strike you?’

‘In the condition I was in!’

She didn’t dare ask for another drink, although she wanted one. The effect of the whisky had worn off and she needed another boost.

‘When Mario talks about his customers, he often describes them as oddballs, and he’s not so wrong. Shall I tell you the story of Mario and Le Trou?’

She said yes, still thinking about the whisky she was keen to earn, and Laure thought of it too.

‘Do you need one?’

‘I think so.’

‘Right now?’

‘Do you think it will do me any harm?’

Laure refilled her glass.

‘You probably noticed that Mario acts the gangster, the tough guy, and a lot of the regulars imagine that he’s done several stints in prison. That idea excites them, especially the women.

‘The truth is that he was a bartender, then a taxi driver in Toulon. You mustn’t mention it, because he’ll be annoyed with me. He prefers to say that he was a sailor, like all the bad boys of the Riviera.

‘He looks like a brute, but actually he’s a softie at heart, and is even shy, strange as that might seem.

‘One day, in Toulon, years ago, he met a South American woman who was a passenger in his taxi. Her husband, who had just died of an embolism

in Monte Carlo, had been a wealthy Colombian cocoa plantation owner.

‘Was she an oddball, as Mario claims? At any rate, she took him on as a chauffeur and manservant. For more than a year they drove around in a Rolls-Royce, spending time in Cannes and Deauville, Paris and Biarritz, Venice and Megève.

‘I’m not boring you?’

‘On the contrary.’

Betty could still picture the two bodies on the bed and now she was certain that it hadn’t been a dream. But wasn’t all of it a dream? The room with its pale-blue panelling and the bust of Marie-Antoinette on the mantelpiece. And, outside, the rain falling monotonously on the darkening leaves?

The light was fading. The lamps, in their little pleated-silk lampshades, grew brighter, and Betty hugged her naked body inside her damp bathrobe.

The dark-haired woman in front of her, too tall, even when sitting down, knew she lacked charm and did not try to pretend otherwise. She chain-smoked, occasionally taking a sip from her glass and jiggling one of the slippers dangling from her toes.

If there were other guests at the hotel and staff coming and going in the corridors, there was not the slightest sound of them.

‘The rest of the story is probably a mixture of hearsay and reality, and I can’t claim to be able to tell which is which. The Columbian lady was called Maria Urruti and was said to belong to one of the oldest families in her country. Since the death of her husband, this family had been urging her to return, bombarding her with letters and telegrams, threatening to cut off her resources until, one fine day, penniless, she found herself forced to make the voyage.

“They want me to go back there because they’re going to kill me!” she told Mario. “They hate me” – which she pronounced as ‘ate – “It’s to kill me, or to lock me away in an asylum that they want me to return. Mario, you’re strong. You have to come with me to stop them from harming me.”

‘The pair of them left, by boat, because she was afraid of flying. The family lives in a city called Cali, at the foot of the Andes, on the Pacific side, and to get there you have to disembark at Buenaventura.’

Betty watched the treetops gradually being engulfed by fog, and stared between the branches at a distant light that looked like a star. She wasn’t

thinking. She wasn't listening. The words flowed smoothly into her, like running water.

'Mario didn't have the opportunity to use his strength. The ship had barely docked when several black-haired men, relatives of Maria Urruti, came on board, accompanied by police officers, and Maria was spirited away while the other passengers were still waiting to complete the disembarkation formalities.

'As for him, he got off the boat a little later, stony broke, to find himself on a foreign quayside.

'He claims he has practised every trade, and hints that some of them were highly illegal. He'll show you the scar at the corner of his eye, which you might not have noticed.

'It's best to pretend to believe him. As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't be surprised if the family had paid him handsomely to be rid of him.

'He roamed around Venezuela, Panama and Cuba for a while. When he returned to France, he had the idea of opening a bar close to the Allied Powers HQ, counting on a clientele of American officers.

'That's Le Trou, which you've seen. But apart from a few rare exceptions, the Americans haven't come, perhaps because it's too close to their base, or they prefer the air in Paris.

'Those who have come, to Mario's surprise, are people whose existence he'd never suspected, the ones you saw last night, the oddballs, as he calls them, foreigners or French people who live around Versailles and Saint-Germain, Marly, Louveciennes or Bougival. Some come from even further afield, the owners of big houses or estates, who often have a wife and children, and who ...'

She tailed off mid-sentence to grab her glass, and seemed to be inviting Betty to do likewise.

'Oddballs! Like me! People who no longer have ...'

She began to drink, leaving her thought hanging between them, and Betty shivered, not just because of the damp bathrobe.



‘How do you like the cannelloni, Betty?’

Mario’s voice was cheerful, familiar, comforting.

‘They’re very good,’ she replied with a grateful look.

‘Admit that it’s not bad here.’

‘It’s so nice that I feel as if I’m already a regular.’

At the beginning of the evening she had been daunted, because she felt like the newcomer and was convinced that, at the sight of her, everyone would remember her episode of the previous evening. Her embarrassment soon passed, especially when she realized that being in Laure’s company acted as a sort of guarantee, and they saw her as one of them.

One detail was proof enough. When a regular came and leaned over Laure to say a few words to her, as happened from time to time, he didn’t feel he had to lower his voice.

On the table between them was a huge dish of cannelloni and a carafe of Chianti. The red wine in the glasses was dark, almost black, with a lighter, pink patch in the centre. Outside, a cold wind lashed rain in the faces of the people alighting from cars, soaking their clothes, and when they wanted to leave, they found their vehicles stuck in the mud.

The buxom barmaid was at her post, and there were more people at the bar than the evening before but few in the restaurant, perhaps because it wasn’t as late.

Everything was as she remembered it, the red walls hung with etchings illustrating English hunting scenes. The previous night, despite her

inebriated state, she had taken it all in, and now she had the confirmation and was amazed.

She had appeared to be totally wrapped up in herself, her drama, her self-disgust. On top of that, she had been so drunk that she'd fallen off her chair. Everything was shaky, in her life and around her, and yet she had noticed minor details like the postcards slipped inside the mirror frame behind the bottles at the bar. She was certain that one of them depicted the bay of Naples, another the temples of Angkor Wat.

The room seemed a little bigger today. She discovered that in fact there were two rooms and that the second one, which was also a restaurant, was darker than the first, illuminated with candles in bottles on the tables.

Was this section reserved for insiders, long-standing customers or lovers? Was Le Trou a haunt for real lovers?

'How's that stomach of yours behaving?' inquired Laure.

'Very well, for the time being.'

She ate heartily. Her eyes, she could feel, were shining, her expression lively and, at the slightest provocation, her lips parted in a smile that was barely hesitant.

She was like a convalescent, and it was enjoyable. She was aware that this sense of well-being was transient, superficial, that nothing had changed, that she was still the same, in fact, with all the problems she had accumulated and to which there was no solution.

Did Laure realize how precarious, how artificial, her mood was? Did she know that from one minute to the next it would all probably begin again, like the previous evening? A little alcohol kept her going, as did having dinner in the company of someone who was taking care of her. But the night before, too, sitting opposite the doctor, she had been similarly relaxed. It had only taken a couple of drinks.

There was no point worrying in advance. It was like being abroad, when, in a different clime and a foreign city, people forget their cares and lose their self-consciousness.

Laure knew her surname now. When they had gone down to the hotel lobby together, the receptionist had asked Betty:

'Would you kindly fill in this form?'

And, on reading her details, the man had commented:

'Étamble, like the general?'

'I'm his daughter-in-law.'

She added:

‘Is it possible to have luggage collected from Paris?’

‘Just give your instructions to the concierge.’

Laure tactfully kept her distance. Betty explained to the liveried employee that there were a number of suitcases, perhaps a trunk, to be collected from 22A, Avenue de Wagram.

‘Do you know how many items?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think they will all fit into a car?’

‘Probably. I’m almost certain.’

‘It might be best if you wrote a note in case there’s a problem.’

She scribbled on a notepad:

Please give my belongings to the bearer of this note. Thank you.

This time, she signed ‘Betty’. It wasn’t an official document. She added nothing. She had nothing to add.

‘Can we go there this evening?’

‘I think so.’

‘Will there be someone at home?’

‘There’s always someone.’

How could there be no one in the apartment? The nanny at least would be there, since Anne-Marie was only nineteen months old.

She was back in Laure’s car and had recognized it from its smell, the rough feel of the seats. General Étamble had died in Lyon the year before. He had lived there for many years. His wife was from Lyon and belonged to the same social circle as Laure, and so it was likely that the two women knew each other.

Laure didn’t mention it, remained unruffled, capable of keeping quiet for a long time without the silence becoming awkward, then suddenly, for no apparent reason, launching into a long anecdote.

‘Did you recognize John?’ she asked while eating, perhaps to stop Betty’s mind from wandering.

And since Betty didn’t understand straight away:

‘The English lord I told you about yesterday. He’s sitting to the left of the bar in the company of a girl with mousey hair wearing a leopard-skin coat.’

It was the bald man, tall and burly, a little portly, with a painter's brush moustache. He was sitting bolt upright on the banquette like a retired officer and looking straight ahead, without paying the slightest attention to his companion, who looked like some sort of starlet.

With his ruddy complexion and rosacea cheeks, he still cut a fine figure.

'He's going to sit there like that, without saying a word, for two or three hours. He doesn't drink whisky but brandy. What's going through his mind while the alcohol gradually soaks in, no one knows, and it is possible that he himself doesn't either.

'At one point, you'll see him stand up and head over towards the door, with a barely faltering step. He realizes, to the minute, when he's had enough and we have never seen him unsteady on his feet. The woman will follow him – today, the blonde, tomorrow or next week a different one, because they never last long.

'His driver waits for him in his Bentley. Within a few minutes, he'll be home at his estate in Louveciennes where he breeds Great Danes.

'I learned from Jeanine, the barmaid with a hairy mole on her cheek, what happens next, because she went there one night when he didn't have a companion, or rather, one night when his companion had become ill and they'd had to ...'

She didn't bite her tongue. But it came down to the same thing.

'Like me, last night,' said Betty quite cheerfully.

'She was in a much worse state and she had to be taken to hospital. Jeanine stepped in, as it were, and I have reason to believe that at his place it's always the same scenario.

'First of all, in the hallway, he offered her a drink, like a man of the world being a dutiful host. Then he led her to his bedroom where he changed into a dressing-gown and sat in an armchair.

'He didn't say a word to Jeanine, who ended up taking her clothes off while he, seemingly satisfied, sat there watching her, like at the theatre.

'He pointed to the bed and she got into it, waiting for something to happen, anything. Apparently, after a while, in the silence of the room and the house, she began to feel scared.

'Still in his armchair, he stared at her the way he's now staring at the face in front of him. Within reach, on a pedestal table, was a crystal decanter containing brandy. The only movement he made was to fill his glass, cup it in his palm to warm it and take the occasional sip.

‘Jeanine thought she was doing the right thing in trying to start a conversation. When she saw that this upset him and he looked annoyed, she kept quiet.

‘This went on for a long time, more than an hour, and, in the end, she saw that John was asleep, still holding his empty glass.’

Laure was not laughing. Nor was Betty.

‘People say that he married one of the most beautiful women in England. She still lives in her house in London and her country estate in Sussex. They’re not divorced or separated. They’re still good friends and see each other from time to time. When he found out he was impotent as the result of a war wound, he simply faded into the background, giving her her freedom. That was twenty years ago and, for the past twenty years, he has sat in his armchair, drink in hand, in front of a naked woman.’

Betty didn’t dare turn to look over towards the corner where the Englishman was sitting, and Laure concluded:

“‘An oddball”, as our friend Mario would say.’

At the bar, two women in their thirties, in slacks and jumpers, were fishing gherkin after gherkin out of a huge jar; the African, Louis, came over at almost regular intervals to show his laughing face as if in a comedy act, and Betty was beginning to wonder whether all this wasn’t rigged, if it wasn’t staged, whether the characters were genuine or not.

‘What became of Maria?’ she asked abruptly.

It was Laure’s turn to be bemused.

‘Maria?’

Betty was in the habit of asking this sort of question. When she was young, her family used to make fun of her, and one of her childhood phrases had become a private joke in the house in Avenue de Versailles. It was before the war, when her father was still alive.

‘What happened to the frog?’

Her parents had read a story from a picture book about a frog and other animals. When the story ended, her little voice had rung out in the silence:

‘What happened to the frog?’

Her father and mother had caught each other’s eye, not knowing what to reply. In the book, the story had ended. There was no reason to take any further interest in the frog.

After that, whenever she opened her mouth to ask a question, her father would interrupt her, laughing:

‘What happened to the frog?’

Was it not a bit like that with the South American woman?

‘Do you mean Maria Urruti?’

‘Yes. I wonder whether they locked her up.’

‘Mario never heard from her.’

‘How old was she?’

‘Around thirty. When he told me about her, I initially thought she was a mature older woman, especially since her husband was nearly seventy when he died in Monte-Carlo.’

Betty too looked around thirty. She said nothing, ate her cheese – brie – but with no appetite. She had to force herself not to look over at the Englishman’s corner and, catching sight of Jeanine who was joking with the two women in slacks, she pictured her on the bed, a four-poster bed in her imagination, lying still and silent under the fixed gaze of the man clutching his drink.

In Buenaventura, the family had boarded the boat, most likely brothers, brothers-in-law, cousins. She saw them as a compact, solid block. They had the authorities on their side.

‘How are you doing, ladies?’

‘Fine, Mario. We’re eating.’

‘That’s good. There aren’t many oddballs this evening. Anyone would think they’re afraid of getting wet.’

He glanced briefly at Betty, to check what state she was in, then, before walking off, pressed his hand on Laure’s shoulder for a moment in an almost marital gesture.

‘The fact is,’ said Laure, ‘he loves his customers, and when they don’t come, he’s not happy.’

But Betty had sensed for a few seconds that, for Mario, she wasn’t a customer like any other and that, sooner or later, there would be something else. Did Laure suspect it? Was she jealous? Was she content with what he gave her?

Betty had begun to float once more and was in search of a solid footing. She hadn’t drunk a lot. She was determined to stop in time, not wanting to be unwell and make a spectacle of herself again.

Even so, she felt a little nostalgic for the previous night, when, inert, she hadn’t needed to worry about herself and nothing had mattered any more.

What mattered right now? She had sent for her belongings. The concierge at the Carlton must have dispatched a driver, perhaps accompanied by a porter. Guy would be sitting in the drawing room with his mother, and probably his brother and sister-in-law too.

The two brothers, the two households, lived in the same apartment block, Guy on the third floor and Antoine on the fourth. Antoine was the eldest. He was thirty-eight and had gone into the military, following in his father's footsteps. One day he would be a general. An artillery commander, seconded to the Ministry of Defence, he had an office in Rue Saint-Dominique.

His wife, Marcelle, was an officer's daughter, the sister of officers. They had two boys, Paul and Henri, who were at the lycée.

Why, since Antoine was the eldest, did they all gather at Guy's in the evenings? They had never made a conscious decision to do so. It had just happened of its own accord, and no one had questioned it.

Sometimes, Antoine would drop in alone, wearing a smoking jacket, and join Guy in his little study. Other times, Marcelle came down with him and Betty had to keep her company.

There was a log fire in winter, a big standard lamp with a cracked parchment lampshade. The children would be asleep, the two boys on the fourth floor and the girls on the third. At around ten o'clock, Elda, the governess, a Swiss woman from the Valais, would appear in the doorway and ask:

'May I go to bed, madame?'

Because Betty was madame. She had a household. Two children, a husband, a brother-in-law, a sister-in-law and, in Lyon, a mother-in-law who wrote to her sons every week. Every couple of months or so, she would come and spend a few days in Paris.

When the general had been alive, she and her husband used to stay at a hotel on the Left Bank where they were regulars. Since his death, Madame Étamble stayed at Avenue de Wagram, on the fourth floor, with her eldest.

She may not have liked Betty but she was not unpleasant towards her, contenting herself with looking at her as if trying to understand.

'Why her?' she seemed to be wondering, as she then glanced at her son.

Betty asked herself the same question. The general's widow was not wrong. Ultimately, no one was wrong. Guy neither, and Betty was

convinced he had loved her, that he still loved her and that, most likely, he was deeply hurt.

She had nothing to complain about. At thirty-five, Guy had heavy responsibilities, grave concerns, because, having graduated among the top of his year at the École Polytechnique, he had a key post at the Union des Mines, Boulevard Malesherbes, an imposing fortress of a building, where banking operations of national importance were performed.

He was handsome, better-looking than Antoine, more striking, as his mother liked to say. Fair-haired with regular features, he dressed with the utmost elegance; not in dark colours, like a businessman afraid of not being taken seriously, but, on the contrary, most often in light colours, choosing pastel shades and soft, supple fabrics. He played tennis. His car was a sports model.

He had a cheerful nature and could make Charlotte laugh for an hour without her becoming bored and without tiring himself. He was the one who had put her to bed each night when she was a baby, and he continued the tradition with Anne-Marie.

Did Laure know the Étamble family?

Betty imagined them all in the drawing room, this evening, when the driver or the porter had shown them her note.

Where had they put her belongings? Who had taken her dresses from their hangers in the wardrobes, gathered her underwear, her shoes, her personal knick-knacks, emptied the drawers of the dressing table and her little Louis XV writing desk?

Olga, the maid, who had always looked at her even more harshly than her mother-in-law and who had strong masculine hands? Elda?

Which suitcases had they used? There were no 'his' and 'her' suitcases. They all belonged to both of them. Had they debated the question as they brought the big trunk down from the attic?

It was three days, four now, since she'd left, and they had probably been expecting her to send someone for her things straight away, the next morning in any case, as she had only the clothes she had been wearing.

Had they not been a little concerned at not hearing from her? Had they imagined that she had thrown herself into the Seine or swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills?

If she telephoned the Carlton, she could have found out whether the driver had returned, if the family had handed over her suitcases, whom he

had seen and what they'd said to him.

Perhaps her mother-in-law's illness had been more serious than the previous ones? She had a heart complaint, that was for certain. She'd been receiving treatment for a long time. Even if she exaggerated her dizzy spells to arouse sympathy, she was still sick and, when Antoine had come to their apartment, he had been very frightened at the sight of his mother, whose lips had turned blue.

'May I ask you what you're thinking about? Am I being indiscreet?'

'About my mother-in-law. You must know her.'

'She lives three doors away from me, on Quai de Tilsitt. Because I've kept my apartment in Lyon and I make a pilgrimage there every so often so as not to lose touch.'

Lose touch with what? With her former life, her social connections? With the memory of her husband? Although she didn't spell it out, Betty was almost certain she understood.

'I used to meet them quite frequently in the past, her and the general, at ceremonies and official dinners we were required to attend. Apart from those obligations, my husband and I had a very small circle made up of doctors, two lawyers and a musician no one has heard of.'

Was there also, in a secluded drawing room, a standard lamp with a parchment lampshade, a piano and a sofa where the ladies sat side by side? Was there a clock that showed the minutes that were longer than anywhere else and, outside, night and day, like a reminder of another life, the noisy rumble of passing cars?

'She's in Paris,' said Betty.

She didn't want to talk about her and yet she was incapable of keeping quiet. She made herself believe that she would stop when she wanted to, that she wouldn't go any further than she herself had decided.

'She's been there for three days,' she added. 'Four now! It's funny, I always count one day less.'

It only made sense to her. For Laure it would doubtless sound baffling.

'I married one of her sons, Guy, the youngest.'

It was Laure who went on:

'The one who didn't go into the army, much to the general's despair.'

'His brother Antoine is at the Ministry of Defence.'

'And he married a Mademoiselle Fleury. I used to know her elder sister. Although the Fleurys aren't from Lyon, they have family there, vaguely

related to mine. As for the general's wife, she's a Gouvieux. Her father owned a chemicals plant which the sons took over, except one, Hector, who's a doctor and is head of ophthalmology at the Broussais hospital, where my husband was also head of his department.'

She smiled with a hint of irony.

'You see! I'm talking as if in a Lyon drawing room. I also know that the Étamables have an estate in the Chassagne forest, near Chalamont, not far from the place where my brother-in-law goes duck-shooting.'

'I've been there.'

'Often?'

'Every year in the six years I've been married. The entire family spends the month of August there – the general, when he was still alive, his wife, the two brothers, their wives, their children ...'

She didn't know why her eyes filled with tears. It wasn't nostalgia. She had always hated that month of August spent at the estate, the vast mansion with its useless turrets, the bedrooms with creaky floorboards, the iron beds they assembled for the children, the damp mattresses, the squelchy grounds.

She dreamed of the sea, a beach in the sun, salt water splashing her face, her body relaxed in a swimsuit. She dreamed of music on the terraces of outdoor restaurants, shellfish with white wine, of a motorized speedboat bouncing over the waves.

For hours on end, Guy would play tennis with his brother, sometimes with neighbours. Some days, the two wives were invited to play mixed doubles, and Betty missed every serve through trying too hard.

'We made a mistake,' she concluded in a leap that did not perturb Laure.

'So I'd gathered.'

Laure turned to Joseph and gave a little signal. Betty noticed. She could have said no. She didn't because it was the only solution.

She couldn't carry on talking like this, in this detached way, as if they were relatives reminiscing over family memories. The portrait she had just painted was false, and Laure must know it was. It wasn't a family affair. The others didn't count. The others hadn't done anything.

'I have two children,' she went on, staring fixedly.

Laure waited in silence for her to go on.

'Last month, Charlotte blew out the four candles on her birthday cake. Anne-Marie is nineteen months, and is beginning to talk like a proper little person.'

Joseph brought the whisky and soda. Why didn't Laure stop her, prevent her from drinking? Was she unaware, she who knew so many things, that it was likely to happen again, that it was inevitably going to happen again?

Was she doing it on purpose, so that Betty would confide in her, because she needed to know people's secrets? She had said:

'Mario calls them his oddballs. You'll see!'

And hadn't she displayed a certain delight in telling the story of Maria Urruti?

When, earlier, she had disclosed John's disability, Betty had had the impression that she was undressing him in public, that she was also undressing the buxom barmaid and even the mousey starlet – all the women who had followed the Englishman to his mansion in Louveciennes, and now Betty was embarrassed to look at him.

Would Laure do the same with her? Would she not relish telling, one day, as impassive and impersonal as her husband describing a clinical case, the story of the young Étamble woman?

What had they said last night, or rather at dawn, when Mario had come to join her in her room?

'Is she asleep?'

'I knocked her out with a jab.'

'Didn't she put up a struggle! Did you undress her?'

Had Laure described her every detail to her companion? Had she added that she was dirty? Had they both come to look at her while she was asleep?

'Where do you think she's come from?'

'Bernard picked her up in a bar.'

Perhaps Laure had mentioned that her suit came from one of the best couturiers in Paris, that her underwear came from Rue Saint-Honoré? Who knew whether they'd searched her handbag?

It would have been quite natural to look inside, even without malicious intent, without unhealthy curiosity. They'd gathered her up off the floor of Le Trou, like a sick animal. No one knew where she hailed from, not even the doctor who, in the meantime, was chasing imaginary rabbits around his bedroom.

Her pulse rate was a hundred and forty-three. She could be taken ill and neither Laure nor Mario would know who to inform, other than the police.

Had they found the cheque? For a moment she wondered whether it wasn't because of the cheque for one million that ...

She didn't want to! She wasn't as exhausted as she had been the night before. She had slept. She'd been cared for. She'd had a bath. She had become almost a normal person again, like the four who had just come in and brought a smile to everyone's faces.

Betty couldn't help smiling as well, and yet they were normal people and her own father, for instance, coming in here with his family, would probably have behaved in the same way.

The man could be anything by profession – an industrialist, a lawyer, a civil servant, a local doctor – he was a middle-aged man, comfortable, self-assured, not necessarily naive.

It wasn't his fault if his wife had grown fat and had a candy-pink complexion. Elsewhere, as a mother, she wouldn't have looked ridiculous either.

True, there were the twins, two tall girls of seventeen or eighteen, as pudgy and pink as their mother, dressed in green to boot, identical from head to toe.

All four were hungry. They had driven a long way and were happy to have found a restaurant in the countryside.

But the minute he walked in the father had frowned on spotting Jeanine behind her bar, and he had had to slide diagonally behind the two women in slacks so as not to brush up against them.

The next moment, he saw the laughing face of the African, who appeared and disappeared like a puppet character.

He seated his wife and daughters, and then sat down himself and clapped his hands to call the waiter:

'Waiter!'

Joseph came over without hurrying.

'Whisky?'

'No, thank you.'

He turned towards the women.

'Do you fancy a little aperitif?'

They said no, as expected.

'Can I have the menu, please?'

'There is no menu, monsieur.'

Intrigued, he glanced over at the tables where people were eating.

'But this is a restaurant, isn't it?'

'Indeed it is.'

Mario broke in:

‘Good evening monsieur, good evening mesdames. I presume you’re going to eat some cannelloni?’

‘What else do you have?’

‘Cheese afterwards, a superb brie, salad and Empress rice pudding.’

‘I mean as a main course ...’

‘Cannelloni.’

Under the table Laure’s foot brushed that of Betty, who was forced to smile. The man gazed about him with a dawning anxiety: first the walls, the bar, Jeanine again, and lastly his eyes met John’s fixed stare.

‘Will you have some cannelloni?’

‘Why not?’

The doctor came in and distracted Betty’s attention. He was dressed as elegantly as the previous evening, in grey again, and walked with a certain stiffness. From the doorway he had recognized her and had hesitated for a moment. Now he was walking over to them.

‘Good evening, Laure.’

Then he leaned over towards Betty and kissed her hand.

‘I hope you have forgiven me for disappearing last night, if you missed me, that is? Laure will have explained to you ...’

He bowed again and then went and sat on a stool at the bar.

The four had resigned themselves to cannelloni and the Chianti that had been placed peremptorily on their table. Still uncomfortable, they tried to reassure themselves by starting up a loud conversation.

‘Was your aunt not surprised to see the two of you arrive unexpectedly?’

‘Guess what, Papa,’ replied one of the daughters in a theatrical voice, ‘Aunty was in the attic having a big clear-out. You remember the attic and all those crazy objects in it?’

She was playing to the gallery and John’s gaze, resting on her, seemed to excite her.

‘We went up without making any noise and, all of a sudden, Laurence let out her famous moo. It really sounded as if a cow had heaved itself up to the attic, and Aunty dropped the pile of gilt-edged books she was holding ...’

Were Guy to walk in here without being warned, would he not have felt ill at ease? Antoine, most definitely. And Marcelle! Antoine and Marcelle

would have turned on their heel straight away. Hadn't Betty ended up shouting, the previous evening?

She wouldn't shout any more. She wasn't afraid any more. But on scrutinizing the faces, she still felt a vague anxiety.

She suspected that Laure had more stories to tell her, that, in a few days, in a few hours, the characters who were still anonymous would become as colourful as the doctor, the Englishman, and that Maria Urruti whom she couldn't get out of her mind.

'What happened to the frog?'

One day, someone might similarly ask, perhaps with a mix of compassion and curiosity:

'What happened to little Betty?'

Because her thoughts always returned to herself. Deep down, at the root of everything, there was a little Betty who was trying to understand herself and wished people would try to understand her.

It wasn't out of self-pity that she said 'little' in referring to herself. She really was little, slight, delicate, and had never weighed more than forty-three kilos.

Only when she was pregnant had she put on weight, but so little that the worried doctors wanted to induce birth at seven months, especially the second time.

Had the fact that she felt smaller, less robust, than other people had an influence on her behaviour? Someone had told her that it had, a medical student who, for a while, had amused himself psychoanalysing her.

She had believed him at the time. She had also believed she loved him. She tried to answer his questions honestly. Until the day she realized that these questions always revolved around the same subject and were designed to reach a foregone conclusion.

She hadn't broken off the relationship immediately. She had carried on playing the game because it excited her too. In actual fact, he was the one who tired of it first, finding perhaps that she lacked imagination and didn't vary her answers enough. He hadn't said goodbye to her. He had simply disappeared.

The four were eating. The mousey girl was waiting. From time to time the African came and poked his head through a doorway.

Bernard made his way to the toilet in a dignified manner, and Mario gazed after him. Laure sipped her drink, watching her companion over the

top of her glass.

‘It’s not their fault,’ sighed Betty, dejectedly.

She wasn’t talking about the table with the twins but about the Étambles, the mother, the two sons, the sister-in-law, the boys of the brother’s family and her own daughters. Her two daughters who were no longer hers!

She had to go back to the subject. It was inevitable. She had to talk, and to talk as she needed to do, she had to drink.

But not here. She didn’t want to make a spectacle of herself again, see the faces turned towards her as they were now towards the foursome, all eyes on her as they had been the previous evening.

She drained her glass in one gulp and said anxiously:

‘Would you mind very much if we left?’

‘Do you feel unwell?’

She didn’t feel unwell, but it was best not to admit it.

‘I don’t know. I’d rather go home.’

She had said *go home*, as if the blue-panelled room with the bust of Marie-Antoinette was already her place.



‘Your luggage has arrived, Madame Étamble. I’ll have it taken up to your room.’

‘I presume there’s no message?’

‘The driver didn’t say anything to me. He simply asked me to give you this.’

On catching sight of an envelope from a distance, she felt a brief pang, as if she were hoping for something, whereas she wasn’t really hoping for anything, didn’t wish for anything coming from that quarter. She felt humiliated by her reaction, especially in front of the concierge, who had carried her blind drunk up to her room the night before and today was speaking to her with exaggerated respect, perhaps being sardonic.

The envelope contained only the keys to her suitcases, as she must have anticipated. No note. Why would they have written to her? The address was in Elda’s hand.

When, a little later, Betty opened the door of number 53 and the two women saw three bulging suitcases and packages in the centre of the room, Laure turned towards the adjoining room, murmuring:

‘I’ll leave you to it. See you in a while.’

‘Do you want to go back to your room?’

‘No, but I imagine you wish to be left alone to unpack your things.’

‘Would you mind staying with me?’

‘Not at all. I was trying to keep out of your way. I’ve always loved packing and unpacking, but I’ve never really moved house and, when my

husband was alive, the only travelling I did was when I occasionally went with him to a conference.'

A large, soft package sat at the foot of the bed, and Betty immediately tore open the blue paper.

'My mink!'

She was unable to conceal her delight, because she hadn't been certain that they would send on her fur. Her sister-in-law Marcelle, although older than her, didn't have one yet and had to make do with an astrakhan coat. When Guy had mentioned a mink, two years earlier, he had explained:

'It's not so much a gift as an investment. In our social situation, you would have to have a mink sooner or later. The longer I wait to buy you one, the more expensive it will be. And since it will last your whole life ...'

So he might have considered it less a personal item of clothing than an asset, a family possession. He had sent it to her all the same and, had Laure not been present, she would have slipped it on at once for the pleasure of being enveloped in it, for the comforting feeling of luxury that it gave her.

'Is it wild mink?'

'We were guaranteed it was.'

'I made the stupid mistake of buying farm-raised mink and within a few years it already looked like rabbit. Shall I pour you a drink?'

Betty suddenly became considerate.

'You're always the one who pays.'

'I promise I'll let you buy the next bottle, the next two bottles if you insist. I'll even show you the place where I stock up.'

Betty tried the keys in the locks, opened the suitcases and then the wardrobe and drawers. Laure came back with two glasses just as she was raising the lid of the last suitcase, the smallest, in blue leather, which she usually kept for toiletries.

On top of the contents, clearly visible, lay two photographs: the one of Charlotte on her fourth birthday and the one of Anne-Marie, beside her parents' big bed, the Sunday she had taken her first steps.

Guy, still in his pyjamas, had rushed to grab his camera to photograph her. In a corner, you could see the striped pinafore of the nanny, ready to support the toddler.

'My daughters ...' she muttered, gesturing to Laure to look at the photos.

'The eldest looks like you. She has your eyes. She will be very sweet.'

Laure was watching her out of the corner of her eye, thinking she was emotional, perhaps expecting her to burst into tears. But Betty was calm, more restrained than downstairs when she'd spotted the envelope, or when, from the doorway, she had caught sight of the suitcases. She grabbed the drink Laure had poured, but not to give herself a boost.

'To your health and to everything you have done for me.'

It was as if, in being reunited with her belongings, she were starting to behave in a conventional manner. True, there was irony in her voice, an irony that was at her own expense, not Laure's. Picking up the photos again and throwing them down on the bed, she said:

'In any case, they're no longer my children and I wonder whether, apart from the time I carried them in my womb, they ever were mine ...'

Needing to keep busy, she scooped up piles of linen which she put away in the drawers, returned to the suitcases, went back to the chest of drawers or the wardrobe, talking all the while, her voice clearer, her features sharp, without taking the trouble to glance at Laure's face to gauge her reactions.

'Do you believe in maternal love?'

She was expecting the silence that greeted her question and went on:

'I was forgetting that you don't have children. So you can't know. I'm talking about maternal love like in books, as it's spoken about at school and in songs. When I got married, I thought that I would have children one day, and I liked that idea. It was part of a whole: a family, a home, holidays by the sea. Then when I was told I was pregnant, I was thrown off balance that it had happened so quickly, when I was scarcely more than a little girl myself.

'I had barely two years with my husband. Already people no longer talked about me but about the baby on the way. Or, if they did mention me, it was in connection with the child, who was more important. Before I had even given birth, I became the mother.

'You're going to think I was jealous. That's almost true. Not entirely. I had hardly begun living. I'd promised myself so much happiness for the day when I would finally have a man to myself ...!

'My idea of marriage was to be two, and we were almost immediately going to be three.

'I didn't think like that every day, of course. At times I was moved, especially when I felt it kicking. Shortly afterwards, my health gave cause

for concern, still not for me but for the unborn baby, and I was put on a strict regimen. I spent most of the time in bed.

‘In the evenings, my husband would come and spend half an hour, three-quarters of an hour with me, then, unable to sit there any longer and having nothing to say to me, he would return to his study or go and join Antoine and his wife in the drawing room.

‘He’d bring me flowers. Everyone brought me flowers and was nice to me, even Olga, the maid, who was already in Guy’s service before I arrived. She’s never stopped seeing me as an interloper.

‘My mother-in-law too was pleased with me.

“*Very good, my girl! Above all, think of the baby, of your responsibilities, and follow the doctor’s orders.*”

‘They secretly watched me to make sure I kept to my regimen. After all, I was so delicate!

‘Was it not natural that they should worry about the future Étamble? Since Antoine, the eldest, had had two sons, no one doubted that Guy would also have boys.’

She bustled about, while Laure helped her by putting the dresses on hangers. There weren’t enough in the wardrobe, and so she went and fetched some from her room.

‘I was taken to the maternity hospital too early and I stayed there waiting for forty-eight hours. I was frightened. I was convinced I was going to pay. Even now, I would find it impossible to explain what I meant by that. It was a confused notion of justice, a justice which, by the way, I didn’t recognize. In giving life to a human being, I would pay one way or another, with my pain, or with my own life, or again by remaining infertile for the rest of my days.’

‘I understand.’

That surprised Betty, who frowned.

‘I wouldn’t have thought anyone else could understand that and I’ve never talked about it to anyone, for fear of being laughed at. The baby was born, a girl; the family pretended to be pleased, especially my husband, who has never looked at me as tenderly as on that day.

‘At the time, I was thrilled; then I understood that that tenderness wasn’t for me but for the mother of his child.

‘Because it was his child. Any woman could have played my part and given him one, more easily than me, without all the little woes and anxieties

of those last months; and, who knows, it might have been the son he so longed for?

‘The nanny, hired from a Swiss school, was at the hospital at the same time as me, ready to take possession of the baby.

“*Rest, my darling. Elda is here to look after the baby.*”

‘With my flat chest, breast-feeding was out of the question. The doctors, nurses, the family – everyone tiptoed in and out of my room, staying only a minute.

“*You rest!*”

‘And I heard them whispering and laughing in the next room.

‘I’m not looking to make excuses. I am trying to understand. It is possible that the outcome would have been the same if things had been different. Perhaps I am a monster. In that case, I would swear that the same applies to thousands and thousands of women.

‘I never felt the bond of blood, the bond of flesh. They showed me a little creature that I didn’t even know how to hold properly and, right away, the nanny took her back as if to return her to safety.

‘At Avenue de Wagram, I would go into the nursery several times a day, full of good intentions. But either the baby was asleep, and Elda would put a finger on her lips, or she was feeding, and Elda would signal to me not to distract her, or again she was being changed, and all I could do was watch.

‘Everything was neat and tidy, everything was clean. In the kitchen too, and in the apartment, thanks to Olga, who didn’t need me either to run a household.

‘That was four years ago. Charlotte started walking and talking, and grew. She is still not my daughter.

‘I don’t know what they’ll tell her, that I’m dead or have gone on a long journey.’

‘Will you not see her again?’

She shook her head so hard that her hair tumbled over her face.

‘They don’t want me to,’ she said in a low voice.

Then, diving into a suitcase:

‘I promised.’

She straightened up, a large yellow envelope in her hand.

‘Let’s not talk about it any more. Where’s my drink?’

‘Here.’

‘Thank you. If I go on, I’ll end up getting you down. It’s Elda who took charge of packing up my things, I recognize her ways. She thought I’d be happy to have the photos of the children and, after all, perhaps she wasn’t wrong. That belongs to my past too, like this envelope that contains old photographs. I had forgotten all about it and I wonder where she found it.’

She talked effusively and, although all the lights were on, it felt to her as if the room was dark. Dark and damp.

‘One day, when I was around twenty, I bought a lovely album for these photos. In my head, they would constitute a sort of story of my life.

‘Look! I can see the album poking out, underneath my toiletry bag. I never stuck anything in it. It’s as new as when I brought it home from the stationer’s, and yet it’s not that I didn’t have the time. If I’d had less time ...’

She shook herself again. Her voice changed register again.

‘Do you want to see my father? I only knew him until I was eight years old, because the war broke out, the Germans invaded France and, once it became hard to find enough to eat, I was packed off to stay with an aunt in the Vendée. Already they were saying I wasn’t very strong. In the Vendée you could get all the food you wanted – butter, eggs, meat and even white bread.

‘Look! Here’s my father. Exactly as I always saw him. He was too proud of his filthy overalls to be photographed in his Sunday suit. His hair was always windblown.

“*At least run a comb through your hair,*” sighed my mother, embarrassed.

“*Why? Would you have me leave a false picture of myself?*”

‘He liked practical jokes, made fun of his women customers. At the table, to make me laugh, he would mimic them and was able to imitate each of their voices.

‘I have no idea what he did during the Occupation. My mother swore to me that she didn’t know either. It was only much later, when he was awarded a posthumous medal and the matter of a pension arose, that she spoke of his mysterious activities.

‘I don’t think he belonged to a Resistance network, because he was a sort of anarchist who didn’t believe in anything and had no time for either Pétain or de Gaulle, or for the Germans, the Americans or the Russians.

‘Even so, the Gestapo came and arrested him a few weeks after the liberation of Paris. We had no news of him until, two years later, my mother was officially informed that he had been shot.

‘We don’t know where exactly. Not in a camp, or in a prison but, according to some witnesses, on a railway platform where he had been made to get off a train transporting a load of prisoners to Germany.’

In a calmer voice she stated, holding out a photo taken in front of a photographer’s pearl-grey backdrop:

‘My mother.’

‘Don’t you see her?’

‘Every so often. Rarely. With my father away, she carried on the business alone for a few months, then she hired a chemist to whom, two years ago, she sold the firm, keeping for herself some rooms in the apartment above the shop.’

‘She didn’t remarry?’

Betty looked surprised, shocked. Her mother was an old woman, wasn’t she? It suddenly occurred to her that she had been widowed at forty, when she was much younger than Laure.

‘Me, at ten or twelve weeks.’

The traditional photo of a baby lying on her stomach on a bearskin.

‘The only time of my life when I was chubby!’

‘You’re not thin.’

Hadn’t Laure seen her naked?

‘Not that thin. Not as thin as I look with my clothes on.’

All the same she gave a wan smile.

‘Me again, at four, when I was sent to kindergarten. And at eight, the day before I left for La Pommeraye. It was my mother who took me there and, with the trains in those days, it was almost an expedition.’

She made no comment on the aunts, uncles, the old glossy photos mounted on card.

‘Do you know the Vendée?’

‘Not well. Only Luçon, Les Sables-d’Olonne, La Roche-sur-Yon too, having spent the night in a hotel overlooking a vast square.’

‘I’ve never been there. La Pommeraye is at the other end of the region, in the Bocage, on the boundary with Deux-Sèvres. The Sèvre Niortaise flows through the village, which is so tiny and so remote that we only saw a handful of Germans during the entire war.

‘My uncle François, who married Rachèle, my mother’s sister, is the most important person in the place because he owns the only inn. He’s also a grain merchant, fertilizer dealer and livestock trader.

‘I don’t have a photo of him. Picture a great brute of a man with a walrus moustache, shining, beady eyes that are mischievous and even a little mean, velvet breeches and leather gaiters, day in, day out, from morning till evening.

‘I remember his smell, that of the dining room at the inn, the lovely musky odour of the rooms, the feather beds you sank into ...’

She was holding a photograph that seemed to surprise her and change the course of her thoughts.

‘I didn’t recall having a photo of Thérèse.’

Visibly moved, she showed it to Laure, not letting go of it or taking her eyes off it.

‘The smallest one, on the left, is me at eleven. Look at my skinny legs and my stiff plaits. My aunt always used to hurt me when she braided my hair ...’

The slightly fuzzy picture was of two girls standing upright in front of the stone steps of a village church.

‘Who was Thérèse?’

‘The servant at the inn, a ward of state.

‘She was barely more than fifteen at the time and always wore the same black dress. It was the only one she owned and it was tight over her pointed little breasts. When I was ten, I already admired them, and I would have given anything to have breasts like hers.

‘Thérèse served in the restaurant when my aunt was busy. She was also the one who cleaned the rooms, peeled the vegetables and, often, was sent to bring the two cows up from the fields.

‘She never complained. Nor did she ever laugh. My aunt said she was sneaky and was on at her all day long, yelling shrilly at one door or another:

“*Thérèse! ... Thé-rè-se! ...*”

“*Yes, madame,*” Thérèse would mumble, popping up right beside her, whereas she was thought to be elsewhere.

‘I wished I could have been her friend, but she was too old for me and I had to be content with hanging around her. I’d heard that she was an abandoned child and those words sounded magical to me, making Thérèse someone special. I sometimes envied her, even though I loved my father ...’

She grabbed her glass and took it over to an armchair, into which she lowered herself, the yellow envelope on her knees and, on top of it, the little photograph, which she glanced at every so often.

‘How Schwartz used to annoy me because of her! Schwartz was the medical student I told you about. He had an evening job in a bar where he washed the dishes to pay for his studies, and he lived in a garret room near Place des Ternes. That was how I met him, because he lived in the neighbourhood.’

She added with a hint of defiance:

‘I was already married, of course. It was even after Charlotte. A year after. Not quite. When I lay on his bed, I could see hundreds of roofs and smoking chimney stacks.’

Laure didn’t bat an eyelid.

‘From being quizzed about you-can-guess-what subjects, I ended up telling him about Thérèse and he claimed that that incident affected me more than all the rest of my childhood. He made me repeat the story so often that I ended up being obsessed by it.’

‘What happened with Thérèse?’

‘You can imagine that, at the age of eleven, I knew as much as all girls of my age, and even more, because I lived in the country. I’d seen the animals. Close to the inn, there was a bull, and all the local cows were brought to him. We used to walk past him on our way home from school.

‘I’d seen boys too. Unlike a lot of my friends, though, I’d always refused to touch them.

‘Every Saturday, my aunt would go by horse and cart to the market at Saint-Mesmin, the neighbouring big village, to sell her hens, ducks and cheeses, because she made fromage blanc with skimmed milk.

‘There, like everywhere in the countryside, I suppose, livestock is men’s business while poultry, butter and cheese are the women’s concern.

‘Was it the school holidays? Was I off school for a reason I don’t remember?

‘I can picture myself, alone in the yard, in the garden, then alone again in the square in front of the church, as if the village was deserted, probably because of the market in Saint-Mesmin.

‘The priest walked past and waved at me. It was summer. It was hot. You could see the pebbles on the riverbed, the water dividing into thin trickles.

‘At one point, I went into the café and there was no one there either. The door to the cellar was half-open. I went to close it. First of all, I glanced into the shadows, which always fascinated me, and there, just behind the door, stood my uncle, servicing Thérèse, who was leaning forward with her head against the whitewashed wall.

‘I say “servicing” because it was the only word I knew at the time, the one everyone uses in those parts.

‘I didn’t move. It didn’t occur to me to leave. I watched, fascinated, Thérèse’s thin, pale thighs which my uncle penetrated with great brutal thrusts.

‘He’d seen me, knew that I was still there, but he didn’t stop. Breathing very heavily, he barked:

“*You, brat, if you dare tell your aunt, I’ll do the same to you!*”

‘Still I didn’t run away. I stepped back slowly, leaving the cellar door wide open, still watching, absolutely enthralled.

‘I wanted to stay to the end, see Thérèse’s face afterwards, hear her voice.

‘She became more extraordinary than ever in my eyes. She didn’t cry, didn’t struggle. Her features were hidden from me by her hair and her folded arm, but I can still see her black stockings that stopped above her knees, her black dress hitched up over her shoulders, her knickers on the floor, around her ankles.

‘I didn’t dare wait for it to finish, for fear my uncle would change his mind and carry out his threat immediately, for fear he would hurt me.

‘I avoided him until the evening and, as you can imagine, I said nothing to my aunt.

‘I realized afterwards that she suspected the truth and chose not to take any notice.

‘I hung around Thérèse more and more, unable to bring myself to ask her my questions. What bothered me the most, I think, was that she was midway between being a girl like me and a grown-up.

‘I’d never considered her entirely as a grown-up and, several times, she’d asked if she could play with the doll my mother had sent me from Paris.

‘Schwartz told me a lot of things about my feelings for Thérèse, some of which are probably true, others which I think are exaggerated.

‘He claimed I envied her, and that is right. I might not have admitted it then, but I can see now that she aroused envy in me.

‘By following the clues, I found out that it didn’t happen to her just with my uncle, but that she did the same thing with other men, and I discovered too that my uncle was jealous of them.

‘He spied on her and, when she was alone in the restaurant with customers, he’d suddenly appear, coming from a shed or the stables, and plant himself near the bar, a suspicious look in his eye.

‘Me, I caught her at least twice. Once in the winter, before supper, after dark, lying in the grass by the roadside, between the inn and the grocer’s where she’d been sent to buy something or other.

‘The man was a local farmhand. I recognized him from his red rubber boots, because he was the only one with boots that colour.

‘Another time, I was passing the room where a travelling salesman was staying. The door was closed. I didn’t see anything, but I heard Thérèse saying:

“Get a move on. If I stay too long, he’ll come up.”

‘From the sounds I could hear, I knew they were on the bed, or on the edge of the bed.

‘So, at fifteen, Thérèse was no longer a girl, like me and my friends, but a woman. Because, to me, becoming a woman was that. I didn’t think that she could be enjoying it and that was precisely, according to Schwartz, what troubled me.

‘In short, being a woman was to suffer, to be a victim, and in my eyes there was something pathetic about that.

‘You don’t find me ridiculous? Am I boring you?’

‘Not at all.’

It seemed to Betty that Laure’s features were blurred and she let her refill their glasses and sit down again in her armchair before continuing:

‘That’s about all. My uncle never touched me, despite his threat, and even though I didn’t leave La Pommeraye until I was fourteen.

‘Because, once the war was over, it was still hard to find food supplies in Paris and because, in my father’s absence, my mother had a lot to cope with, she decided to leave me there for a while longer.

‘How would I have reacted if my uncle had dragged me behind the cellar door too? I would have been scared, for certain. I don’t know if I’d have screamed and, to be honest, I don’t think that I would have struggled.

‘I am going to go too far, perhaps scandalize you if you’re a Catholic.’

‘I am not.’

‘My parents weren’t either, my father less than anyone. Only my aunt used to go to mass, and she was the one who made me celebrate my first holy communion, unbeknown to my parents.

‘I was twelve. It was after the incident of Thérèse and the cellar. When I had to confess, I didn’t say anything to the priest about my uncle, or about what I’d seen, but I stammered that I often had sinful desires.

‘I could tell it was bad but, at the same time, I had the feeling that what had happened to Thérèse was a bit like receiving a sacrament.

‘A punishment too, just like when I gave birth, I had the vague sense I was paying for something.

‘In my mind, women were made for this. To be humiliated and physically hurt by men.

‘I couldn’t wait to be physically hurt, to receive that consecration, and I would desperately feel my breasts, which weren’t growing. I’d gaze in the mirror at my stick-thin legs and my child’s narrow, rounded stomach.’

Without knowing it, she wore the same fixed smile as in the photo of her at La Pommeraye. Laure was solemn. The radiators were on and yet they both felt as if the cold was seeping into the room.

‘Everything I have done since, I have done because I wanted to. Ultimately, that is what I wanted to say to you, out of honesty, because I have always wanted to be honest. I am not a victim. I am not to be pitied. No one has hurt me, rather I am the one who has hurt others.

‘That’s probably the reason why Schwartz left me without a word, simply moving to a new neighbourhood and new lodgings overnight.

‘I suppose he felt I was leading him on, goodness knows where.

‘As for Guy, at thirty-five there he is, wifeless, with two little girls who will grow up and, unless he remarries, be an encumbrance one day.

‘Oh! There’s a word that comes back to me, which says more or less what I am trying to explain. As I moved slowly away from the cellar door, do you know why I was so anxious to wait for Thérèse and talk to her? To ask her:

“*Show me your wound.*”

‘The word just came back to me after all these years. I wanted to have a wound too. All my life, I’ve ...’

She looked Laure in the eyes, defiantly, and ended in a hard voice:

‘All my life, I’ve chased after my wound.’

She had sworn to herself that she wouldn't cry. She couldn't hold out any longer. Fat tears welled up behind her warm eyelids and ran down her nose, forming a salty taste in her mouth. At the same time, she was laughing.

'I'm an idiot, aren't I? Goodness what an idiot I am! I've ruined everything, sullied everything. I've spent my time making myself dirty and I'm telling you these stories to gain sympathy. All my life, from the age of fifteen, yes, fifteen, in imitation of Thérèse, I've been nothing but a whore. A whore, do you understand?'

Unable to sit still, she leaped up and began to pace up and down the room. Laure hadn't moved from her armchair.

'It's not because my husband threw me out, because the Étamblés excluded me from the clan, from the family, that I started drinking. Nor is it because I sold my children. I can recite the document by heart:

"I, the undersigned, Élisabeth Étamble, née Fayet ..."

'Because I had to write my real name. It's an official document. *Élisabeth Étamble, née Fayet*, acknowledges that she is a prostitute, that she has always had lovers, before and after her marriage, that she would pick them up in bars like a professional, that she brought them into the marital home and that she was caught making love a few metres from her children's bedroom ...

'And here I am, sounding emotional, telling you about my memories, my girlhood memories!

'Look! When I say I sold them, I'm not lying ...'

She grabbed her handbag, rummaged inside feverishly, and flung the cheque into Laure's lap.

'One million, an advance of course, because that would be too cheap.

"I don't want you to end up in the street," he said.

'He, that's Guy, you understand? Honest Guy, decent Guy, the son of General Étamble, who had the misfortune to fall in love with a girl and marry her without making inquiries as his mother had advised him to do.

'It was Guy who laid down the law and the others just listened, making sure he hadn't forgotten anything – Antoine, Marcelle in her dressing-gown, having been dragged out of bed for the occasion, and the General's widow, clutching her left side with both hands while waiting for the doctor.

'Perhaps it killed her.

"You will let me know your address as soon as you have one so that my lawyer can contact you. I'll make sure you lack for nothing, whatever

happens.”

‘And that’s what it became, my wound, all my wounds, my hundreds of wounds, the wounds inflicted by all the men I chased after to punish myself.’

She seized the bottle with a rapid movement, as if afraid of being stopped, raised it to her lips to drink straight from it, in a wilfully dissolute gesture.

‘I’ve been drinking in secret for years, because I couldn’t live without it, because I’m incapable of being like them and, anyway, I wouldn’t want to be. When I was expecting Charlotte, then Anne-Marie, I stopped drinking, because the doctor told me it could damage them.

‘I was happy enough to have a whore’s babies, since my husband was keen on having a family. But I had enough pride left not to bring children into the world who would be sick or deformed because of me.

‘Well, when I went into hospital, I took a bottle with me, a flat bottle, hidden under my things, and a few hours after giving birth, I was already having a sip.

‘An alcoholic and a whore, that’s what I am!’

She raised the bottle to her lips again and Laure, who was on her feet now, tried to snatch it from her. Betty struggled, suddenly furious, scratching and lashing out. Between gritted teeth, she snarled, panting:

‘You too, you’re like them and I’m going to show you ...’

She tailed off mid-sentence, abruptly letting go, and stood there, arms dangling, in the centre of the room, beneath the chandelier, so stunned that her face was expressionless.

Laure had just slapped her, calmly, without anger, but so hard that it had left a red mark on her cheek.

‘And now, my dear, to bed. Get undressed.’

The strangest thing was that she obeyed, and began to remove her clothes with the gestures and eyes of a sleepwalker. A few minutes later, when she was lying between the sheets, Laure’s husky voice said:

‘You’re freezing. I’m going to make you a hot-water bottle.’

Stepping into her room, she had made a point of taking the bottle of whisky with her.



She slept a dull, greyish sleep, as exhausting as walking through desert sands. She didn't dream. There was nothing, no shadows or light, no action, no people, nothing but the dragging, monotonous rhythm of her heart, which skipped the occasional beat.

Then she heard a bell, real or unreal, she didn't ask herself, she was so tired. The shrill sound pierced her skull and she hoped it would stop, as with the departure of trains and ships, for instance, but the ringing became more and more insistent and eventually she realized that it was the telephone by her bed.

She didn't want to hear anyone speak or to speak herself. She answered it purely to stop the clamour, dropping the receiver on to the pillow.

Then a voice said, distant, distorted as if from an old broken-down gramophone:

'Madame Étamble! ... Madame Étamble! ... Are you there? ... Can you hear me? ... Madame Étamble! ... Madame Étamble! ...'

At length she mumbled:

'Who is this?'

'The hotel switchboard, Madame Étamble. You had me worried. I've been calling you for five minutes. I was about to send someone up to your room.'

'Why?'

The previous evening, Laure had given her two sleeping pills, but it wasn't the medication that was making her body ache. Something had

snapped, at a certain point when she wasn't paying attention, and now, somewhere inside her, a switch had been turned off.

'There's a call for you from Paris.'

She did not react, didn't think of her husband or of anyone who might telephone her. The room was dark, with only a wan light filtering between the slits in the shutters.

'I'll put the call through.'

She wished she could go back to sleep.

'Is that you, Betty?'

She didn't recognize the voice. She had already closed her eyes and her breathing was becoming deeper.

'This is Florent.'

She stammered reluctantly:

'Yes.'

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'I can hardly hear you. Are you well?'

'Yes.'

He was in a world of light, he was awake, washed, shaved, dressed and fully alive.

'I saw Guy early this morning. You gave him a big fright by not getting in touch. It was only last night, thanks to the driver, that he finally learned your address.'

His name was Florent Montaigne. He was a friend of Guy's, a friend of the family. He was sure of himself because he was a very successful lawyer.

'Are you certain that everything is fine?'

'Yes.'

'You're not unwell? You sound very far away. Are you still in bed?'

'Yes.'

'Can I talk to you?'

He added hesitantly:

'Are you alone?'

'Yes.'

'Guy has told me everything and has asked me to contact you. In my opinion, the sooner the better, you understand? It is my intention, if it is convenient for you, to make a quick trip to Versailles this afternoon, late afternoon preferably, and we could have dinner together.'

‘Not today.’

‘Tomorrow morning, then? Tomorrow afternoon I can’t because I’m in court.’

‘Not tomorrow.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll call you.’

‘Are you certain that everything is all right, that you don’t need any help?’

‘Certain. Goodbye, Florent.’

She exerted herself to stretch out her arm and replace the receiver. The communicating door was half-open and, in the adjacent room, the curtains were drawn back, everything was bathed in daylight, life had already begun. She had the impression that the sun was shining for the first time in days and days.

Laure must have heard. She would probably come in and ask if she needed anything, but Betty wanted neither to see nor talk to her.

It wasn’t because of the slap, which she remembered as she remembered everything she had said the previous evening.

On the contrary, the slap had done her good and, had she been capable of it, she would have given it to herself, to put a stop to her outburst.

Until now, she had always avoided uncomfortable home truths. She knew what they were. She had no delusions as to her character. The slap, which was long overdue, had abruptly brought her back down to earth.

There was no longer that ambivalent inconsistency between her words and thoughts, no more fever, no more artificial heat, no more vagueness. Instead was the reality in all its rawness, in black and white, in stark, cruel lines.

And that was impossible to communicate. It was already overwhelming to think of it. It was dangerous.

She had cheated, this time like other times, instinctively, because it was her nature. Out of an innate need to protect herself?

She always found a way, afterwards, to make it bearable, for it not to be too ugly, too dreadful.

She wouldn’t speak to Laure any more, or to anyone. She didn’t have the energy. She felt listless and empty. All she wanted was to lie still in her bed, her eyes open, gazing at a corner of the mirror where she could glimpse a little light and a flower on the curtain.

It hadn't occurred to her to ask Florent for news of her husband and her children. For his part, he hadn't seemed surprised at what had happened and had only been concerned on finding her voice unrecognizable. Admittedly, it was a different Betty he had known.

Florent was married, and Guy was not exactly indifferent to his vivacious, sparkling wife, Odette.

Every so often, the two couples used to go out together. The previous winter, they had been to the theatre, and on leaving, had decided to have dinner in a restaurant on Place Blanche. As they got into their cars, Florent had said:

'Will you take my wife? And I'm kidnapping yours.'

The car had barely started up when the lawyer, one hand on the wheel, had begun caressing Betty with the other. There had never been anything between them. He hadn't wooed her. He hadn't said anything. He still wasn't saying anything but stared straight ahead as he weaved in and out of the traffic.

It had never entered her head that she could say no, and, docilely, as he seemed to be expecting, she had reached out her hand in turn.

The previous evening, she had told Laure that at the age of eleven, unlike some of her friends in La Pommeraye, she refused to touch boys.

It was true. As was everything she had told Laure. But it was only part of the truth, the aspect that can be communicated.

What held her back then, despite her curiosity, was the fear of sullyng herself, of materially dirtying herself. Only much later had the word 'dirty' taken on another meaning, developing into an obsession, perhaps because she had heard it said too often by her mother.

'Don't touch, Betty. It's dirty!'

'Don't pick your nose, it's dirty!'

And, if she knocked over a glass of milk:

'There you go again! Making everything dirty as usual!'

She was a dirty girl. Her father too was dirty, as her mother kept telling him:

'You should change your overalls, Robert. Those are so dirty they could stand up on their own.'

There were dirty customers and clean customers.

'Madame Rochet is filthy as sin.'

While Madame Van Horn's home, on the other hand, was so clean you could have eaten off the floor.

Betty wanted to be dirty so as to be like her father. She was angry at her mother for nagging him, for talking to him as if she had rights over him, whereas he was head of the family.

'Are you coming downstairs? You're not going to spend the evening doing your filthy experiments again?'

He would laugh. He didn't get annoyed. Perhaps, alone in the back of the shop where he had set up a laboratory, he imitated his wife the way at the table he imitated his customers to make Betty laugh?

She dreamed of being older, of being her father's wife and treating him as he deserved.

She tried to go back to sleep, to stop thinking, but when she wasn't thinking, she still had the same sense of inevitability.

She had delayed the final moment as long as possible. Because of Bernard, the doctor with the hypodermic needles, who had picked her up in Rue de Ponthieu and driven her to Le Trou instead of taking her to the nearest hotel as she had expected, and then, thanks to meeting Laure, who had taken it upon herself to rescue her, everything had become a muddle.

Two or three times since, she had talked to her heart's content, going round and round the truth, taking care to avoid the crux of it.

It was both true and false that she had wanted to be dirty as a sort of mystical protestation. She would have liked to be clean too. All her life she had yearned for order and cleanliness, and that was why she had married Guy.

She had been working in an office at the time, on Boulevard Haussmann, a stone's throw from Boulevard Malesherbes and the Union des Mines. They'd met in a snack bar where Guy would grab something to eat when he didn't have time to go home for lunch.

At first, it hadn't occurred to her that the relationship could be serious. She was peeved that he didn't ask her to sleep with him, as the others did, and in the end, out of sheer frankness, she had almost demanded it.

On realizing that he loved her and wanted to make her his wife, she had been thrown into such a panic that she'd decided not to see him again.

'I have to tell you, Guy ...'

'Tell me what? That you don't love me enough?'

'You know that's not true.'

‘Then what?’

‘I’d rather you didn’t marry me. It’s for the best.’

‘For what reason, I’d like to know?’

‘Because of everything. Because of me. My life.’

She intended to tell him everything, everything she’d done, everything she’d almost done.

‘Look, Betty. I wasn’t born yesterday. What you have been is none of my business and is no longer yours. It’s wiped clean, understood? Do you love me?’

‘Yes.’

She believed it. She was certain. She probably still loved him. She surely still loved him because she was continuing to hurt herself.

‘In that case, say to yourself that life is just beginning, as if we were both new, and that on Saturday I’m taking you to Lyon to introduce you to my mother.’

He imagined it was easy. For him it was easy. He never looked back. He had decided on the place she would occupy and had put her in it. And so there were no problems.

‘I’m not even capable of running a household.’

‘Olga is there to do that, and she would hand in her apron if I were to make the mistake of marrying a woman who interfered with her household management.’

She had ended up believing in it, and, full of good intentions, she had slipped into the skin of her new character.

All that was a mistake. Not only because of her past.

It was a mistake because she and Guy didn’t want the same thing. Proud and protective, he would say:

‘You are my wife!’

Was that not enough? His wife! The mother of his children! The woman he came home to every evening to tell about his troubles and his hopes.

‘You look a little pale today.’

‘That’s because I haven’t been out.’

‘You shouldn’t spend so much time indoors. I’ll have to ask Ménière to examine you.’

Their doctor. For Guy, if something was wrong, it was Ménière’s business, and had she shouted at him, as she so often wanted to:

‘Pay a little attention to me!’

He would have replied, in good faith:

‘I do nothing but pay you attention!’

It was true that he was concerned about her health, bought her dresses and little gifts, and that he often thought to send her flowers.

‘To *me*. Don’t you understand that word?’

She needed him to pay attention to *her*, to her real self, to the person she truly was. Not pay attention according to his needs, but according to hers.

In short, it was out of cowardice, for his personal ease, for his peace of mind, that he hadn’t allowed her to confess. She had tried several times. Each time, he had put a finger on her lips, smiling.

‘What did we decide?’

It was too easy. He wanted the pleasant, convenient side of her, the one that suited his life, happy to brush aside anything that could have complicated their relationship, and in so doing, almost condoning it.

The moment something didn’t exist for him, it must no longer exist for her.

‘Aren’t you happy with me?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Why don’t you go out with Marcelle more often? She’s a bit dull, but she’s decent at heart, worth getting to know better.’

Only one person in the world had cared about her for who she was: her father.

When she was still only a little girl, he had understood – he the eccentric – that she was a budding woman and had treated her as such.

She had been very young when the war had separated them, and so they hadn’t been able to have long conversations. Most of the time, they played and joked, and yet, with one look from her father, a squeeze of his hand, she felt that he understood her and that for him she was a human being.

Might he even have known her well enough to be worried about her future?

Schwartz, later, had almost been the second man. She had hoped so, until she realized that for him she was no more than a sort of guinea pig. He too knew her. He had dismantled her like a piece of machinery. He’d forced her to confront things that she had always refused to see. He would sometimes interrupt her, laughing:

‘Careful, darling. There you go sublimating again!’

That was his word. And yet, despite his cynicism, sometimes he was moved.

‘You would so like to be a heroine, my poor Betty! I’m coming to the conclusion that that’s your downfall. You aim so high, you have such ideas about what you could, what you should be, that each time you fall a little lower.

‘You’re a born liar. You spend your life lying to yourself because you’re unable to face yourself in the mirror.

‘When you are bored or you feel bad about yourself, instead of going to the cinema like other people, or buying yourself new shoes or dresses, you start telling yourself lies.’

Once, overwrought as she often was with him, she had talked a great deal and he had muttered, half-joking, half-serious:

‘You’ll end up in the mortuary or in a psychiatric hospital.’

Had he done her harm? Had he done her good? His diagnosis was accurate, because she now found herself well and truly at the threshold of the mortuary or the hospital.

She could hear muffled footsteps. Out of tact, Laure had not joined her immediately after the telephone call. No longer hearing her voice, she had now come in to make sure that Betty had gone back to sleep.

Betty could have closed her eyes and pretended, but she was too weary to cheat.

‘I thought you were asleep.’

She didn’t move her head, didn’t attempt to smile. This morning she didn’t want any human contact, any presence. She felt as if she had gone beyond that point. She had tried. She had drunk. She had talked until she was gasping for breath. She had more or less distorted all the truths, for herself even more than for others, and on wakening, she was confronted with them despite everything.

It wasn’t worth starting over again!

‘I hope you haven’t had bad news?’

Out of kindness rather than politeness, she shook her head.

‘Are you hungry? Would you like me to order your breakfast?’

For a moment, she was tempted by the idea of eggs and bacon, but she knew that, if she gave in, she *would* have to start all over again.

Then there’d be the whisky, the elation, the need to talk and then ... What was the point, since there was no solution?

‘Not even a cup of coffee?’

Frowning, Laure grasped her wrist, staring at her watch. Her lips could be seen moving. Betty studied her as if she were seeing her for the first time and thought to herself that she had probably never been pretty. She had masculine features. Only her very soft, very warm brown eyes belied her mannish looks.

She read the numbers on her lips:

‘Forty-nine ... Fifty ... Fifty-one ... Fifty-two ...’

Laure stopped, surprised.

‘Does your pulse rate often slow down suddenly?’

What was the use of answering? To answer what?

‘Would you rather lie in the dark?’

Her mouth opened a fraction at last to murmur:

‘I don’t mind.’

The atmosphere in the room must have been depressing and Laure went to draw back the curtains and open the shutters. Instead of flowers, Betty saw a patch of sky and the treetops in the mirror.

‘But you didn’t have a bad night, did you? I didn’t hear you moving. Are you in pain?’

She indicated that she wasn’t.

‘A headache?’

Still no. She was impatient for it to be over, she wanted to be left alone.

‘Would you mind very much if I called a doctor? I know one here, in Versailles, who looks after me and is very thorough. I promise he won’t ask any awkward questions.’

She repeated, annoyed, as if she were being forced to make an effort for nothing:

‘I don’t mind.’

‘Shall I splash a little water on your face?’

Her skin must be shiny. She was perspiring. She smelled of sweat but she still said no, no again, and Laure, anxious, understood that her presence in the room was unwelcome. She went into her own room and picked up the telephone.

‘Hello, Blanche, put me through to 537 ... Yes ... I’ll hold on ...’

Betty could hear, even though it was happening in another world that was nothing to do with her.

‘Hello ... Mademoiselle Francine? ... Is the doctor at home? ... Can you put me through to him without disturbing him? ... Hello! ... Is that you, doctor? ... This is Laure Lavancher ... No, I’m very well ... I’m not calling about myself, but for a friend who’s here with me and who I’d like you to come and see ... It’s difficult to tell you ... Last night I gave her two phenobarbital tablets and this morning her pulse rate is fifty-three. No! I don’t think she has a particular drug intolerance ... Twenty-eight years old ... Thank you, doctor ... I’ll be expecting you ... Come straight up to my room ...’

She was loath to return to Betty and could be heard lighting a cigarette and walking over to the window, which she opened. She lingered over her cigarette, inhaling the fresh air from outside, before coming back through the communicating door.

‘It’s one o’clock. The doctor will drop by at around a quarter to two, before his surgery. Would you like to get washed and dressed? Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat or drink?’

Betty merely flickered her eyelids.

‘I’m going to have them send up a little something to eat. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me.’

Laure pressed a button and a bell could be heard ringing at the far end of the corridor. While waiting for the food, she poured herself a drink, and Betty felt nauseous at the thought of the viscous yellow whisky in the glass.

She had the impression that she could smell it and she wondered how she could ever have drunk it.

If any man other than Bernard had spoken to her at Le Ponthieu, right now she would probably be in a hospital bed with rows of patients, nurses and a junior doctor doing his rounds at set times.

Was that not what she had been blindly seeking for three days and three nights? She hadn’t actually considered it. She’d had so few moments of real lucidity that she’d barely given it a thought.

All she knew was that she was tearing her life apart, that she was doing so with a sort of frenzy, and that this gave her relief.

In short, it was a defiance, revenge. It was also a climax. It was an end. She was dirtying herself through and through, to the maximum, with no possible going back.

It had to come to this. It had been brewing inside her for months, and she was deliberately defying fate to provoke disaster.

Admittedly, sometime before, there had been Schwartz and the business with Florent in the car, which hadn't led anywhere because Florent had been afraid.

There had been others, and it had happened that she would sometimes, in the afternoons, go into certain inconspicuous bars in Rue de l'Étoile, for example, or Rue Brey, where there were only couples sitting in the shadows and men waiting and chatting with the bartender.

It was in one of these bars that she had met Philippe, a gangling, secretive young man who played the saxophone in a cabaret in Rue Marbeuf. Philippe didn't question her like Schwartz. He spoke little and was usually content just to gaze at her dreamily.

'What are you thinking about?' she would ask.

'About you.'

'What do you think of me?'

He would reply with a vague gesture.

'It's very complicated.'

When she lay sprawled on the bed after making love, he would grab his saxophone and improvise tunes that were both ironic and haunting. She knew nothing about him, other than his mother was Russian and he had a sister. He rented furnished lodgings on Rue de Montenotte, where Betty would sometimes darn his socks for fun.

He knew that she was married and had children, because she had told him so, but he never asked any questions.

In the end, he had become a need. The hours spent at Avenue de Wagram were dead time, indifferent, like that wasted in a waiting room. She was impatient for the afternoons, when she would go and meet Philippe. The concierge greeted her when she arrived, calling her the lovely little lady. It was Betty who brought bottles purchased from the grocer's on Place des Ternes, and cakes and sweets.

Not yet twenty-four, he was still awkward, defenceless and unconcerned about his future. When she tried to encourage some ambition in him, he merely gave a thinly veiled smile.

'You sound like my sister.'

He appeared oblivious to the millions of people living around him, jostling one another and elbowing their way, and in the street a sort of aura of solitude clung to him.

'What would you do if I didn't come to see you?'

‘I don’t know, because you do come. Maybe I’d go and look for you?’

‘Where?’

‘At your place.’

‘What about my husband?’

He didn’t reply. He didn’t ask himself any questions either.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow.’

But, the last tomorrow, as it happens, Betty had not been able to go to Rue de Montenotte. Guy’s mother had arrived in Paris without warning, taking advantage at the last minute of a lift from a friend who had a driver. Marcelle had a dentist’s appointment which she couldn’t postpone, so it fell to Betty to entertain General Étamble’s widow.

It was Elda’s day off and she was visiting a friend in the suburbs. She wouldn’t be back until the last train, just before midnight.

After lunch, when it was time to go back to his office, Guy had said to his wife:

‘I’ll leave Mother in your hands, and this evening, I’ll take her to the theatre.’

Because her main reason for coming to Paris was to see a new play. The afternoon had dragged on endlessly, and until Marcelle came back from her dentist’s, Betty hadn’t had a moment alone to telephone Philippe.

‘I have to be quick. Walls have ears. I can’t get away this afternoon. I’ll call you tonight at around nine.’

In Elda’s absence, it was the servant who mainly looked after the children but, because her mother-in-law was there, Betty was forced to act the proper mother.

They had dined early, at Antoine’s. Guy and his mother had left for the theatre. When Betty arrived back at the third floor, Olga was lingering in the apartment.

‘You can go upstairs. I’m not moving from here.’

It was as if Olga had a suspicion, because she agreed only reluctantly to go up to her room on the seventh floor.

‘Hello! Is that you?’

He replied ironically with a few notes on the saxophone.

‘Are you sad?’

A musical-clown glissando.

‘Answer me, Philippe. I’m a nervous wreck. If you knew what an afternoon I’ve had!’

‘What about me!’

‘Did you miss me? Listen. You know where I live. The children are asleep. It’s the nanny’s day off. The maid’s just gone up to bed and my husband’s at the theatre.’

‘So?’

‘Don’t you understand?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘You don’t sound very keen.’

He hesitated.

‘I’ve wanted to do this for ages. You’ll understand better once you’ve been here.’

Standing by the door in her bathrobe, she’d watched out for him, wondering what was taking him so long. When at last he was beside her, she sensed that she had been in danger of losing him, and she leaned against the door for a long time, her lips glued to his.

‘Come.’

She led him into the drawing room, motioning to him to walk on tiptoe and to keep his voice down.

‘Are you scared?’

‘No.’

‘Aren’t you pleased to see where I live?’

She pointed to the piano, the velvet drapes, the gilded picture frames.

‘Come close to me.’

She was febrile, with a strange glint in her eyes. She wanted to see him on the family sofa where she spent so many evenings sitting beside Marcelle and where, that afternoon, her mother-in-law had seated herself.

This was revenge. She had had to persuade Philippe to come and if he hadn’t, she would have been profoundly disappointed. The word ‘dirty’ hadn’t come into her head at the time, but it was what she intended to do.

‘You seem hesitant, as if you’re scared.’

Jumping up, she ripped off her bathrobe, beneath which she was wearing nothing, and pretended to dance, naked for the first time in the middle of the Étambles’ drawing room.

‘What about the children?’ he objected.

‘They’re here, on the other side of this door. There’s a corridor, another door on the left, the one to their room. They’re asleep. Wait!’

She half opened the door.

‘Now, if Charlotte were to get up, we’d hear her.’

He didn’t share her enthusiasm, and was still reluctant, as if he sensed that any man would have sent her into the same feverish state that night.

It was an old score she was suddenly settling, not so much with her husband as with the family, with a world, a lifestyle, a way of thinking.

Exaggerating her brazenness, she took the initiative, forcing him to take her, and he could see, up close, her eyes shining triumphantly, her clenched little teeth.

‘Come in, Mother. I’ll call Antoine and ask him to join us. Stretch out on —’

Neither Betty nor Philippe had heard the front door open, footsteps on the carpet in the hallway. The glazed door of the drawing room opened and the lovers remained frozen for a moment, too surprised to think of separating.

Philippe, who had not undressed, was the first on his feet and, bowing his head, he waited to see what the husband would do.

As for Guy, his gaze fixed, he was still supporting his mother, who had felt unwell at the theatre, and he signalled to the man to leave.

Betty, still naked, had to pick up her bathrobe from the centre of the room, while her mother-in-law protested in front of the sofa where they wanted to seat her:

‘Not on there.’

Her son settled her in an armchair.

‘Give me my drops, quickly. In my handbag. Twenty drops ...’

He ran into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water, almost bumping into Betty in the corridor as she was heading for their bedroom.

She knew it was over, and was not sad. All she wanted now was for things to move quickly, and she dressed with clumsy movements, choosing a dark suit and a black beret.

She still hoped to leave via the back stairs, avoiding explanations. Someone must have thought of it, because Marcelle came and knocked on the door.

‘Guy is asking for you in the drawing room.’

Antoine was there too. Her mother-in-law’s chest was still heaving.

Guy had become a stranger, a cold, methodical man as one imagines important bankers to be. He was talking on the telephone in his study, whose door was open.

‘Thank you, Maître Aubernois. Agreed. So long as you have understood my wishes ...’

He rose and turned to his wife, without curiosity, without visible anger, without any emotion of any kind.

‘Come.’

‘Where?’

‘Here. Sit down. Write.’

... renounce my maternal rights and pledge to sign any subsequent documents which ...

This hadn’t happened on earth, in a big city, in a house where people were sleeping peacefully, but in a nightmare where movements dragged on in slow motion and toneless voices sounded like an echo.

‘Here’s a cheque for your initial needs. As soon as you let me know your address, I’ll send your things and then my lawyer will contact you.’

Even her mother-in-law had risen, as people do in church or at solemn moments. Her hands were pressed together on her breast. Her lips trembled as if she intended to speak, but she didn’t say a word.

All four stood stiffly upright as she walked through them and made her way to the door.

She hadn’t asked to kiss the children goodbye. She hadn’t said anything. She forgot to shut the door and one of the four – she didn’t know which one – overcame their paralysis to shut it behind her.

She declined to take the lift and, once in the street, began to walk very fast in the rain, keeping close to the walls.



‘Come in, doctor.’

Dressed in navy blue and gripping his black bag, he looked like one of those Frenchmen who march behind a flag on the Champs-Élysées, and he had thin ribbons of several colours in his buttonhole. It was clear that he took life seriously and thought about things, including the way to conduct himself in a patient’s bedroom.

‘So you’re feeling unwell,’ he stated, the way a musician tunes an instrument, still standing, looking Betty up and down. She did not even bat an eyelid in greeting. ‘Let’s have a look. May I wash my hands?’

He knew the way to the bathroom. He must know every room in the hotel. He came back, gently rubbing his palms, and pulled up a chair beside her bed.

‘Are you in a great deal of pain?’ he asked, seizing Betty’s wrist and taking her pulse.

She shook her head.

‘You’re not hurting anywhere? No headaches? No pains in your chest or your abdomen?’

She merely replied with gestures and he turned to Laure, who made to leave the room.

‘Please stay. Unless your friend objects. Her pulse is sixty now.’

He didn’t seem taken aback at his patient’s attitude, as if he dealt with similar cases every day. Placing his bag on the bed, he brought out the blood-pressure monitor, which seemed to be giving him some trouble.

‘Hold out your left arm ... Not too stiff ... Excellent ... I’m simply checking your blood pressure ...’

She saw him, his expression serious, gazing at the little needle on the gauge while she felt the blood pulsing in her artery. He took two, three readings.

‘Nine point five. Do you know if you usually have low blood pressure?’

And, turning to Laure, as if he were no longer relying on Betty to give him any information:

‘What did she take this morning? Did she have breakfast?’

‘She refused to eat or drink anything.’

‘Not even a cup of coffee?’

‘No.’

You could almost hear his mind working, following a familiar thought pattern, like a circus horse that automatically changes step at a certain point in the ring. With the same precise, meticulous movements, he put his monitor away and picked up the stethoscope, inserting the two earpieces into his ears.

‘Breathe in through your mouth ... Good ... Again ... Keep going ... Now cough ...’

She obeyed, noticing that he had tufts of hair in his nostrils and in his ears.

‘Breathe in again ... Not so hard ... That’s fine ... Can you sit up?’

Weary and listless, she raised herself up with more difficulty than she had expected.

‘This won’t take long ...’

He applied the metal disc to two or three places on her back, lingered on one spot, the highest, as if he had found something abnormal.

‘Hold your breath ... Good ... Breathe in ... You can lie back down ...’

On her chest, he returned to a point that probably corresponded to the one on her back that had concerned him. When he listened like that, his gaze became fixed and expressionless, like that of a hen.

‘Do you see your doctor often?’

‘Not very often.’

She had spoken without realizing it, in spite of herself, because she had promised herself to submit to this examination without taking any part in it.

‘Have you had any serious illnesses?’

‘Scarlet fever, when I was three.’

He wore the stethoscope around his neck and with his bare hand he felt her upper chest, pressing his fingers between her ribs.

‘Does that hurt?’

‘No.’

‘What about here?’

‘A little.’

‘Like this?’

‘More.’

‘Do you sometimes feel pain here?’

‘Not anywhere in particular. In my whole chest.’

Drawing back the covers, he felt her stomach through her nightdress.

‘Have you moved your bowels this morning?’

‘No.’

‘What about yesterday?’

‘I don’t remember. No. Not yesterday either.’

Still grave, he selected another instrument, a little nickel hammer.

‘Don’t be afraid.’

She knew what he was going to do. This wasn’t the first time she’d been examined in this way. Then he scratched the soles of her feet with a pointed object, a metal toothpick he’d taken from his waistcoat pocket and which reminded her of Bernard and his rabbits.

‘Can you feel anything?’

‘Yes.’

‘And now?’

‘Yes.’

He exchanged a glance with Laure, whom he treated rather like her mother, her elder sister or a nurse. The last thing he did before putting away his instruments was to push up her eyelids.

‘Do you sometimes feel giddy?’

‘I have these past few days.’

‘Badly enough to lose your balance?’

‘No.’

‘Have you recently had an emotional shock?’

She did not reply and it was Laure who nodded.

‘Besides,’ added Laure, ‘we both had a lot to drink. Last night I gave her two 100mg phenobarbital tablets. She slept peacefully. She was woken up by the telephone and she’s been like this ever since.’

He turned to Betty and tapped her forearm.

‘First of all, let me reassure you, madame, that you do not have any kind of organic illness and that your functional disorders will resolve themselves with quiet and complete rest.’

His eyes seemed to be asking for Laure’s advice before continuing.

‘My friend is alone here, doctor. She is going through a rough period.’

‘I understand! I understand! The best thing, of course, would be a spell in hospital. Is there any reason why not?’

Without looking at him, Betty said:

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Mind you, I’m not insisting. If you have the strength to take care of yourself, and above all to be strict with yourself, you’ll recover just as well here as anywhere else. Do you receive any visits?’

‘None,’ replied Laure on her behalf.

‘That’s good. No going out either, for four or five days at least, and then, only short strolls in the hotel grounds. Nothing to eat until tomorrow morning; otherwise, this evening, perhaps a light vegetable broth.’

He had taken a notebook from his pocket and was conscientiously writing down everything he said. No visits. No outings for five days. A liquid diet until ... He paused to remind himself of the day ... Until Saturday morning ...

‘You’re not afraid of injections?’

He was treating her like a child, or an idiot.

‘I’ll give you one before I leave and, tonight, you’ll take one of the tablets I’m going to prescribe. Continue every evening for three days. And, twice a day, a little dose of reserpine with your midday and evening meals.

He removed a sterilized syringe from a metal tin with sticking plaster wrapped around it and filed off the end of a vial. His movements and his voice reminded her of a ritual, a religious ceremony.

‘Turn over slightly ... That’s enough ...’

He pinched her nightdress to raise it while being careful not to uncover her lower abdomen.

‘That didn’t hurt too much?’

That was it. He was putting his things away.

‘Madame Lavancher will telephone me, should you need me before tomorrow evening. Otherwise I’ll drop by after my surgery, between six and seven o’clock.’

He cast around for his hat, which he had left in Laure's room, and all of a sudden, while he was conversing with Laure in the corridor, Betty regretted having let him leave.

He had only carried out professional procedures, spoken words she knew so well that she could have predicted what he would say next, and yet for a brief moment he had enveloped her in a world that was comforting.

For a quarter of an hour someone had taken care of her, as if she were worth it, as if her life mattered.

What was he saying to Laure? A doctor's wife, she had read on his face the hypotheses he ruled out one by one. Was she telling him what had happened to Betty, or at least what she knew of it?

Because she didn't know the whole story. She knew nothing of the worst part. Besides, in spite of everything, Laure had belonged to *their* world. Whatever she did, she was still a little bit on their side, as was the doctor.

There would have been no point in talking because they wouldn't have understood.

'Would you like to rest?'

Her eyelids flickered again.

'I can reassure you, in all honesty. The doctor spoke to me in the corridor. At one point, when he was examining you, I could tell he was concerned. He might have feared neuro-circulatory asthenia, which, incidentally, isn't serious but is a nuisance.

'Having examined you, he is categorical. You are suffering from the repercussions of your emotional upheaval of the past few days. I'm the person who is going to take care of you, and I warn you, I'll be strict.'

Her cheeriness misfired. Betty did not react.

'You'll probably doze off for two or three hours. That's the effect of the injection. I'll instruct the kitchen staff to make you a vegetable broth. I'll leave you for the time being. See you later, Betty.'

Maybe she was wrong to refuse to go into hospital? She would have been sent to one of those convalescent homes on the outskirts of Paris where the newspapers regularly report that such-and-such a star is being treated. That sounded grey and dreary. Here too was dreary, but it was possible for her to leave without asking anyone's permission. When she felt less exhausted, she would go.

She heard the telephone ringing in the next room, Laure's hushed voice.

‘Yes ... Yes ... No ... She’s fine ... She’s in bed, yes ... The doctor came ... I’ll explain ... Not straight away ... What? ... Let’s rather say two ... That’s right ... See you later ...’

Mario was on the other end of the line, she was positive. Mario wanted to come in an hour’s time and Laure had asked him to wait for two, to be certain that Betty would be asleep.

But she knew that she wouldn’t be asleep. The drug she’d been injected with was numbing her body, making her burning eyelids heavy, but was not inducing sleep.

She continued to think, especially in images, and all the images were of the same grey, with less contrast than that morning, less dramatic substance.

She unspooled them wearily, the way a person turns the pages of a book they have to leaf through to the end. She felt it was important, that she had a duty to face up to it.

In her mind, words didn’t have their full, everyday meaning, but for her they were clear, and that was the main thing.

She had to face up to things instead of always trying to run away. But drinking to give herself the illusion of courage, then talking to Laure in a breathless voice and finally collapsing wasn’t facing up to things.

She had always known instinctively that everything would end in disaster, even before meeting Guy. As a child, she would watch the other little girls as if they had something that she didn’t. It is true that at other times she was happy, if not proud, to be herself, because then she had the feeling that she was the one who was the most complete.

The question no longer arose. It had happened. She had said nothing to them as she made her way to the door, all four of them standing there in the drawing room, watching her leave. Had she been ashamed? She would have liked, after the event, to have convinced herself that she hadn’t been ashamed, because, if she had, it would prove that they were right and she was wrong.

She couldn’t remember whether she had hung her head or whether she had looked them in the eye. She must have looked at them because she could clearly picture the expression on each of their faces.

Why had she signed without protest? Out of pride? Out of indifference?

And yet, once outside in the rain, she had started to run, keeping close to the walls of the buildings, as if seeking refuge. Then, breathless, she had

gone into a lit-up bar on the corner of Avenue de Wagram and Place des Ternes.

There were a lot of people, a red-copper counter, trays laden with glasses of beer passing by her head and, at the tables, men and women eating.

‘A whisky.’

‘On the rocks?’

‘Yes. Make it a double.’

‘Soda?’

‘I don’t mind.’

She almost snatched it from the bartender’s hands and gulped it down, and some people around her looked at her disapprovingly.

‘Pour me another.’

She rummaged in her bag for some money, and the cheque almost fell into the sawdust on the floor. She caught it as it fluttered down. Would she have bent down to retrieve it from between people’s legs? Perhaps not.

She drank and left, still walking hurriedly, raindrops on her face. Weaving in and out of the cars, she arrived in Rue de Montenotte, her heart thumping as she raced towards the lift.

The concierge opened the glazed door of her lodge.

‘He’s not there, my little lady.’

‘Did he not come home?’

‘I mean he came home about half an hour ago, but ten minutes later he was back down with his suitcase and his instrument. He asked me to call him a taxi. He seemed in so much of a hurry that I thought he had a train to catch.

“*Is your sister ill?*” I asked him.

‘Because I know from the letters she sends him that she lives in Rouen.’

‘What did he reply?’

‘He didn’t reply. He looked frightened. When I inquired whether he would be away for long, he shrugged.

“*You can dispose of the room.*”

‘That was it! I assume he won’t be back. Seeing as the rent is paid in advance, I had no right to stop him, especially because the taxi arrived almost immediately and he gave me a generous tip.’

Betty had no idea what time it had been at that point, and from then on, for three days and three nights, she would lose track of time, of when she’d last eaten or slept.

She had cried as she walked the dark streets, without thinking about which direction she was taking, and she sometimes talked to herself.

'It's not fair. I should have told him.'

She found herself in Avenue Mac-Mahon, then, still choosing poorly lit streets, she had reached Porte Maillot.

She had walked into a bar, the smallest and gloomiest. She ordered a whisky. There wasn't any. She drank a brandy with water and a woman with a fat behind wearing a great deal of make-up and wobbling on stiletto heels, stared at her, trying to figure her out.

She must have been getting drunk. She wasn't aware of it and was still bent on finding Philippe. She had gone in the wrong direction. She would have to retrace her steps. It didn't occur to her to take a taxi and, besides, Philippe didn't start work until midnight.

It couldn't be that late. He must have had to drop off his suitcase somewhere before going to his cabaret. He had been afraid of Guy, which was only natural.

She was impatient to reassure him. She was free now. She wouldn't impose herself on him. He was too young to saddle himself with a wife. But, all the same, he'd be able to see her whenever he wished.

She walked, trying not to lose sight of the Arc de Triomphe. She had no idea how much money she had in her bag. If Philippe needed money, there was the cheque, which she was prepared to give him.

She had had to stop somewhere else. A man had grabbed her by the arm, saying filthy words, and she had felt panic-stricken.

The nightclub where Philippe worked was called Le Taxi. Betty had never been there and she couldn't find it. She looked at the neon signs one after the other and in the end it was the doorman from another cabaret who pointed out the sign to her – the least bright, in tiny, dark-red letters, the very last one in the street.

The atmosphere inside was suffocating. The place was smaller than the drawing room at Avenue de Wagram and full of smoke and loud music. Clusters of men stood around the bar and, a few feet from them, a woman was performing a striptease under the spotlight.

The musicians wore light-blue dinner jackets. She tried to seek out Philippe but couldn't see him.

'Is Philippe here?' she asked the bartender, rising on to her tiptoes.

'Which Philippe? The sax player?'

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. I can’t see him. He must have got someone to replace him.’

A man wanted to buy her a drink and already had his hand on her thigh.

Not yet. Not here. Philippe had given up his lodgings and had not come to work. That meant he had done the same as Schwartz.

Evaporated. Vanished in Paris. If she wanted to find him, over the coming days she would have to go from cabaret to cabaret, from Étoile to Montmartre and Montparnasse, and seek him in all the music venues.

‘*As soon as you have an address ...*’ her husband had said.

The sensible solution was to go and book herself into a hotel before having her belongings sent. But how could she have shut herself away alone, between four walls, crawled into a bed and slept?

Another bar. She hadn’t had anything to drink at Le Taxi. She needed to get drunk as fast as possible. She recalled different lightings, nearly always a mirror behind the glasses and bottles, often girls, next to her, who eyed her as if she was a threat.

‘A whisky ... A double ...’

The word ‘dirty’ had come back into her mind, because of her mud-stained shoes and her wet feet.

She was beginning to be dirty. She had a growing urge to see this through to the bitter end. Since she hadn’t succeeded in being the cleanest, was it not better, while she was about it, to become the dirtiest?

She didn’t want to sleep. What she wanted was not to be alone.

Already, she was no longer alone. A man paid for her drink and took her by the arm, pushing her on to the pavement in a quiet street where the light of a hotel could be seen. They walked in through a glazed door. A redheaded woman, sitting at the desk, watched them go past and, raising her head, yelled up the staircase:

‘Is number three free, Maria?’

‘Right away, madame.’

‘You can go up.’

A narrow corridor with a worn carpet. An unfamiliar smell. An open door into a room where the bed wasn’t unmade but the chambermaid was hastily changing the towels.

‘It’s a thousand francs, excluding service.’

Betty was so drunk that, once the woman had left, she sank on to the bed fully clothed and almost fell asleep. She barely remembered the man's face. He was quite fat, with blue eyes, and he wore a big red-gold wedding ring.

'Get undressed.'

She tried, failed and relapsed into her drowsy state. He didn't stay long. Looking embarrassed, he had placed a banknote on top of Betty's handbag.

She slept at last, plunging quickly, like a lift whose cable has snapped.

Someone was shaking her shoulder.

'Get up, girl.'

She didn't understand what was wanted of her, why she was being harassed.

'Come on! Don't act the innocent. The half-hour's up.'

'I want to sleep.'

'You'll sleep somewhere else. If you don't get out right now, I'll call Monsieur Charles.'

He came, in shirtsleeves and slippers.

'What is Maria telling me? That you're refusing to leave the room?'

He stood her up, but she was swaying and her gaze was vague.

'I see what this is. I don't like that here. What's more, I bet your papers aren't even in order. I don't want any trouble and I need the room.'

In the street, she stumbled. There were big gaps in her memory. She had eaten hard-boiled eggs and drunk coffee that had a foul taste, and then thrown up in a filthy toilet.

A man almost as drunk as her, with a foreign accent. She no longer knew if it was that night or the next.

If it was the next, she was incapable of saying how the first night had ended up.

They drank together in a place where the customers were pressed up against one another and he fondled her rump and her breasts in front of everyone, with a smug air of ownership. Someone had said something to him and a fight nearly broke out.

Outside, it was still raining and they walked arm in arm. She talked to him about Philippe, trying to explain that it was a misunderstanding, that he had taken fright for nothing, because he was very young and above all very gentle.

'A poor creature, you understand? I have to find him. It's of the utmost importance, because he won't dare show himself. He reckons Guy is angry

with him. Guy didn't even look at him and would be incapable of recognizing him in the street. The truth, if you want the actual truth, is that Guy already knew everything. Do you see? No fool, Guy!'

She was drunk. But she didn't think she was mistaken. Already, before, it had sometimes occurred to her. Quite early on, Guy had stopped asking her how she spent her afternoons.

Who knows whether he didn't prefer that solution? Who knows even how things would have turned out if his mother hadn't been with him when he'd returned home and caught Philippe and her on the drawing-room sofa?

There was no point asking herself these questions. He had never attached any importance to her past. He loved her in his own uncomplicated way, with a comfortable love. He didn't want to know what was going on in her head. At most, he would sometimes ask her, as if he knew the answer:

'Is everything all right? Are you happy?'

So long as she replied yes, he didn't probe any further.

She saw herself with the foreigner, bang in the middle of an avenue, with cars passing either side of them, drivers swearing at them and the man asking, suddenly suspicious:

'Where are you taking me?'

'I don't know. You're the one who's taking me.'

'Me? Where would I take you?'

They had had a confused argument.

'You don't know where we can go?'

'No.'

'You're not a thief, I hope?'

He looked her in the eyes as if to hypnotize her.

'Then we'll try my hotel. I'm not sure they'll let you in.'

They'd hailed a taxi, had asked it to stop somewhere outside a bar for a last drink. The hotel was next to Galeries Lafayette, with a marble staircase and a red carpet.

The man had drunk too much to get what he wanted. He still insisted, demanding help from his companion. Aching and dizzy, every few minutes she fell asleep, and he eventually dropped off too.

She could have slept all day and perhaps the next night too. She felt ill. She had the impression it was barely light when he forced her to get dressed because he had a flight to catch.

It was later than she thought. The streets were teeming with people, a sea of umbrellas above their heads.

She wandered through the crowd, ghost-like among the flesh and bone, and would occasionally stop in her tracks at the kerbside to watch the cars going past. She was no longer thinking about Philippe, or Guy, only sometimes about the letter, the shame of having signed a document selling her two daughters.

This became an obsession and she was muttering about it under her breath as she pushed open the door of a bar.

‘Come in. Don’t make a noise. I think she’s asleep.’

Mario had knocked on the door so discreetly that Betty hadn’t heard anything. But she could hear Laure’s whispering. She knew they were kissing.

‘I’ll go and check.’

She closed her eyes and felt a presence by her side, someone leaning over her then walking away, taking care not to make the floorboards creak, and then pulling the door to.

She could no longer make out the words, only the kind of murmur you can hear from a confessional. A bottle was uncorked. Glasses were being filled. The tone of the conversation was calm, even, with the occasional stifled laugh from Mario.

He hadn’t sat down but was pacing up and down the room, then the bed groaned lightly, as if Laure were reclining on it.

The light was fading. Laure must have talked about her, and Betty had the impression that at one point Mario came over to the door to peer through the crack.

In thousands of rooms, at that same moment, couples in the semi-darkness were chatting in the same way, smoking cigarettes and having a drink.

Why did that seem so extraordinary to Betty, lying in her bed? Mario was in the habit of visiting Laure in her room; he was her lover; they met up every evening at Le Trou where Laure always ate her dinner.

They conversed in an undertone, in a simple, relaxed manner, she sprawled on the bed, he sitting in an armchair. And if later they felt the urge to make love, nothing would stop them. It wasn’t certain. It wasn’t essential.

They were happy like that, confident, light-hearted.

Insidiously, envy was born in Betty. Fate was unjust. She didn't attempt to define the nature of the injustice, but she felt frustrated, as if something had been stolen from her, as if it were actually Laure who had stolen something from her.

Ultimately it was Laure who had chosen her from among all the strange characters, all the oddballs, who frequented Le Trou. The doctor with the little creatures had barely disappeared when she had come and sat down at her table, glass in hand.

Betty hadn't called out to her, wasn't even aware of her existence.

Did she not know, she who was a doctor's wife, that Betty wasn't supposed to drink, that she had already had too much, that she was physically and mentally at the end of her tether?

What had she done? She'd filled her glass, twice at least, perhaps more. She had brought her to the hotel without consulting her.

She had cared for her, of course, but she had given her more to drink, starting the next morning, so as to pump her, extract confidences from her, to add a story to her collection.

Betty lay there in the dark without moving, weak and listless, knocked out by whatever drug the doctor had injected into her. Meanwhile, next door, the pair of them were chatting away like two people who understood each other through half-spoken words.

Why did Laure deserve to be happy? Because already, before, she had been happy for twenty-eight years with her husband – she had boasted of it. She hadn't remained on her own for long, a year she'd said, and she had found Mario almost immediately.

Why her, when Betty had tried so hard? Nothing bothered Laure. She came and went in life, relaxed, considering others with indulgence.

She considered Betty with indulgence too, and indulgence was the word, the kind of indulgence Betty didn't want. What she wanted was what she was entitled to as a result of her efforts.

There was no justice. In a few days or in a few hours, room 53 would be empty, Betty elsewhere – it didn't matter where – and, in the next room, Laure and Mario would carry on meeting as evening fell.

'What else did she tell you?'

'She told me so much that I'm forgetting some of it. You see, she's a sad creature. She'll spend her life running after something without ever

knowing what.'

'She has the eyes of a lost animal.'

'She might end up finding a good soul who'll give her a home, like a stray dog.'

Those weren't necessarily the words they would use, but she didn't think she was imagining things. She was convinced that it was true in substance, that that was what would happen. Laure would give Mario a smug, assured look, because, Betty gone, he was not likely to let himself take pity on her.

They fell silent now, and she soon understood why.

Would she herself still be capable of making love after what she had been through these past three days and three nights?

The two of them, flesh against flesh, saliva mingled, taking their pleasure in silence, motionless, and Betty stared at the grey sky and the black trees in the mirror, digging her nails into her skin. She wanted to scream, to make them stop, so that they would stop being happy.

She was tempted to get dressed and leave, so that, later, they would be mortified and shamefaced on seeing the empty room.

She didn't have the energy. Besides, as soon as she appeared in the lobby, wouldn't the concierge hasten to inform Laure? Had she not given instructions to that end? It was she whom the doctor had spoken to in the corridor, delegating his authority to her, in a way.

He had allowed Betty not to go into hospital on condition that she didn't leave the room, didn't move and didn't receive any visitors.

The crack in the door lit up. The bedside light had just been turned on in the next room, and Mario was saying:

'Do you think she's still asleep?'

'If you're worried, go and have a look,' replied Laure, still on the bed.
'But first, give me a light.'

'I find it strange.'

'What?'

'That she spends so much time sleeping.'

His footsteps came closer, retreated, then came closer to the door again, which he ventured to open a little wider.

He moved soundlessly, the way parents enter a child's bedroom at night, trying to make out Betty's face in the dark. To see her more clearly, he stepped forward, leaned over, saw her open eyes and the finger placed on her lips.

She smiled at him knowingly, as if she were putting her trust in him, and he smiled back, batting his eyelids to signal his agreement, and withdrew as silently as he had come, pulling the door to behind him.

‘Well? Is she asleep?’

‘She seems to be.’

He wasn’t exactly lying, merely cheating.

‘What did I tell you? Pour me a drink, will you?’

Betty had at last closed her eyes and was breathing regularly.



Laure hadn't spoken to her about Mario's visit. She wasn't accountable to her, of course. This was still significant, though, and Betty was quite glad to have a grievance, small as it was, against her companion.

She didn't like people who always appeared too perfect. She mistrusted them. After throwing herself on her, Laure was already beginning to feel a little weary, to long to have her own life back, especially since Betty was bedridden and the doctor had forbidden her to go out or to drink.

'Did you sleep well?'

She too was cheating when she replied that she had.

'Are you hungry?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll have your vegetable broth brought up. Which do you prefer: dim or bright light?'

She didn't care. She lay there, inert, and derived a secret pleasure from doing so. Laure lit the lamps, flitting between the two rooms. The soup arrived and Betty sat up in bed.

For both of them, it felt as if things were dragging on. Time was passing slowly this evening, as if each had something else on her mind.

Laure, in her room, got changed and didn't know what to do with herself. Her voice was slightly different and she seemed to be fussing even more than usual.

'Was it a bit tasteless? Wait while I plump up your pillow. Would you like the chambermaid to come and make your bed? Do you want to freshen up?'

All those words, all those sentences, and finally:

‘Would you mind very much if I left you alone for a couple of hours to go and have dinner out? It’s not very charitable of me to say this when you’re confined to bed, but I need some air, some life. If you want anything, ring the bell. I’ll leave instructions for Louissette. She’ll telephone me if necessary and I’ll be here within a few minutes. You’re not annoyed? You don’t feel as if I’m abandoning you?’

On the contrary, Betty was pleased she was going. She couldn’t wait to be alone and, after letting ten minutes or so go by, so as to be certain that her friend hadn’t forgotten anything and wouldn’t be coming back, she got up, began by closing the communicating door, for no particular reason, perhaps as a symbolic gesture, and went into the bathroom.

She wasn’t feeling very strong and she took a long time to wash, do her hair and put on some discreet make-up.

While choosing a nightdress from the drawer, she found a travel alarm clock and started to wind it up.

‘Hello, mademoiselle, can you tell me what time it is, please?’

‘Are you better? It’s half past eight. Eight thirty-two, to be precise. Do you need anything?’

‘No, thank you.’

She set the hands. This was the first time since Avenue de Wagram that she had taken an interest in the time, was aware of it, and that already represented a return to some kind of life.

In spite of the doctor’s orders, she would have been capable of getting dressed on her own and going out, of calling a taxi to take her to Le Trou.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she was tempted to do so, and tried to imagine Laure’s reaction on seeing her walk in, and that of Mario.

She mustn’t. It would be no use, quite the opposite. She switched off the lights, except the bedside lamp, and slid between the sheets.

She didn’t intend to sleep. Nor did she want to dwell on depressing memories. Something was brewing, something still very vague, which it wasn’t advisable to spell out, a possible solution.

Yesterday, this morning, still this afternoon, she had been convinced that there was no way out. This evening, she was in a state of expectation, fighting off the numbing drowsiness. All of a sudden, at ten to nine, her hand groped for the bell marked *Beverages*.

She needed a coffee. A few more minutes and she would have fallen asleep. Jules knocked at the door, worried, and murmured:

‘I’ll call the chambermaid right away.’

‘It’s not the chambermaid I want.’

‘Madame Lavancher told me ...’

‘It doesn’t matter what she told you. I want a cup of black coffee.’

‘That’s different.’

All the same, he was hesitant.

‘I suppose I can bring you one. Are you sure it won’t do you any harm?’

A little later, he brought her a filter coffee and she sat up in bed. She was waiting while the coffee strained when the telephone rang. She reached out, surprised that something had happened so soon. A man’s voice said:

‘Madame Étamble? I haven’t woken you? I apologize for disturbing you. A Monsieur Étamble insists on speaking to you.’

‘Did he give his first name?’

She thought it might be Antoine.

‘No. I’ll ask him.’

‘Don’t bother. Put him through.’

‘The thing is, he’s downstairs.’

Under his breath, as if he were afraid of being overheard by someone close by, he added:

‘He asked me a lot of questions, demanded to know whether you were alone, if you’d had any visitors ...’

It hadn’t occurred to her for one moment that Guy might want to see her, or even, if it was Antoine who was waiting, to send his brother. Hadn’t Florent, his lawyer, already contacted her?

‘Send him up.’

She took a sip of coffee and snuggled between the sheets, resuming her pose of that afternoon.

The stern Jules walked ahead of the visitor along the corridor and showed him into the room. It was Guy, hat in hand, embarrassed, who was trying to accustom his eyes to the dim light.

‘I’m not disturbing you?’

She waved him with a weary hand to a chair, the one at her bedside in which the doctor had sat.

‘Have a seat.’

‘When he spoke to you on the telephone, Florent had the impression that you weren’t yourself. He said that he could barely recognize your voice. I was afraid you were ill or that something had happened to you.’

‘I am simply tired. Very tired. It will pass.’

She watched him covertly. He was the same as always, a little more anxious, a little awkward. He did it on purpose, out of prudishness, to choose mundane language.

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘This afternoon.’

‘What does he say?’

‘That I’ll be up and about in four or five days.’

‘Do you have someone to take care of you?’

She automatically looked over towards the communicating door.

‘A friend. She’s gone out for dinner and will be back shortly.’

She felt no emotion on seeing him and she was even amazed to note that he seemed like a total stranger.

She found it hard to believe that she was his wife, that, for six years, she had lived with him, sleeping in his bed every night, that they had two children together, made from part of each of them.

Did Guy feel the same? He too gazed at her furtively as if trying to think of what to say.

She was the one who spoke.

‘Are the children well?’

‘Very well, except that Charlotte has a head cold and is cross at being kept indoors.’

‘Has your mother returned to Lyon?’

‘Not yet. She’s staying with Antoine. She’s better but it’s preferable for her not to travel on her own at the moment. The friend she came down with had to go back. It’s likely that, in two or three days, Marcelle will drive her home.’

It was almost unbelievable. They were talking as if nothing had happened, uttering the same words, even though there was no real bond left between them.

Betty still didn’t understand why he had come, found it hard to believe it was simply to inquire after her health. He could have sent Florent or possibly Antoine. He could even have asked the hotel management. Which he had done, in fact. So? Why come up?

Putting his hat down on the carpet, he stood up, because he had never been able to sit still for long, especially for an important conversation, and he had to resist the urge to stride up and down as he was used to doing in his study.

‘I wanted to say something to you, about the matter of the document you signed. Know that it is not my intention to use it right away.’

... I declare that I was caught by my husband and my mother-in-law, Madame Étamble, a widow, in the marital home, at 22A, Avenue de Wagram, on ...

Everything was there, the date, the time, the name of her accomplice, which she’d been loath to divulge. The presence of the two children in the apartment was mentioned, as well as the fact that she was stark naked.

She agreed to an at-fault divorce and relinquished in advance her maternal rights.

‘I’ve thought very hard about it. I shan’t hide the fact that having no news of you for several days worried me.’

‘Florent told me.’

‘It was above all to make sure that nothing had happened to you that I asked him to telephone this morning to suggest a meeting. Apparently you refused to see him.’

‘I was waiting until I was better.’

‘Have you had a nervous breakdown?’

‘I don’t know. In any case, it’s not serious.’

He clasped his hands behind his back as he walked, like when he was dictating.

‘I think, you see, that in a situation like ours, we shouldn’t be in a rush. No one can foresee the future and we are not the only ones involved. Mother and I talked about it at length.’

Betty’s forehead creased, her pupils narrowed. She listened with heightened attention.

‘I don’t know what you will think. It is not necessarily the best solution. I presume you realize that it would be difficult now for you to come back home.’

She couldn’t believe her ears.

‘On the other hand, it’s not good for you to remain on your own. Because I imagine you are on your own?’

‘Didn’t the concierge tell you I was?’

‘Yes. Besides, I thought you would be. My mother and I wondered whether we could try an experiment. You would go with her to Lyon. There’s no reason why she can’t stay in Paris until you’re better. Two or three days won’t make any difference. You’d live there with her for a while and if, afterwards ...’

He didn’t finish his sentence. He was clearly embarrassed, but full of good intentions.

‘Was this your idea?’

For Betty, it was at the same time both kind and repulsive. As he paced up and down the room, this overgrown boy, Guy, was hinting that she might be able to resume her place in his home, with his children, rather as if he were beginning to forgive, as if he were promising to forget.

And it was her mother-in-law who had thought of it, who had suggested this trial period comparable to a nun’s novitiate.

She would take her in under her roof, under her control. In the apartment on Quai de Tilsitt, full of the general’s memorabilia, she would watch her day after day, noting her progress, probably counting on her influence.

Betty didn’t laugh, didn’t become indignant. She almost had tears in her eyes.

‘Were you hoping I’d say yes?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is it what you want?’

‘I’m thinking of the children, of you.’

He felt sorry for her. He had just extended a helping hand to rescue her.

‘Thank you, Guy. I am very touched by your gesture. And by your mother’s. Please tell her so from me.’

‘Is it no?’

‘I believe it’s wiser. Not so much for me as for all of you. I warned you, remember. You wouldn’t listen to me.’

With one sentence, she reversed their positions. She was the one who became magnanimous, self-sacrificing and, as she spoke, she glanced at the carriage clock, wondering what was going on in Mario’s restaurant.

She was afraid her husband would linger and ruin everything with his presence.

‘You were right to come. It was better for us to say goodbye on a different memory.’

If Schwartz had been there, he would have said sarcastically:

‘And there you go, romanticizing again!’

She hadn’t expected this opportunity, this part she was being given to play, this choice that she was being offered.

‘I’ll telephone Florent in a few days. Go. Don’t forget to thank your mother. It’s not my fault if I’ve hurt you, believe me, but all the same I ask you to forgive me.’

She went along with it herself and, what’s more, she was half sincere. It wasn’t a cynical act. She felt no attachment to Guy, but, if life had been different, they might perhaps have been able to be happy. Well, he could have been happy, in any case. He could have been happy with any woman, except with her.

She had no regrets, but that didn’t stop her feeling sorry for him.

‘Go!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Go!’

She was panic-stricken at the thought that Mario might arrive. Guy didn’t realize that he represented a past world from which she had cut herself off. She was already living elsewhere. She was convinced another life was about to begin, had already begun, or almost, but it was still precarious, vague.

He picked up his hat, murmuring:

‘You don’t need anything?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Good luck, Betty.’

‘Thank you. You too.’

He didn’t know whether to hold out his hand. She didn’t dare hold out hers. As he made his way slowly over to the door, she said again:

‘Thank you.’

He didn’t turn around. She heard his footsteps fade away down the long corridor and she wiped her hand over a forehead damp with sweat.

She drank the rest of the coffee, now cold, even though she was not likely to fall asleep any more. Guy’s visit had perked her up, and so had the thought of Le Trou, where she already was in her mind.

She was tempted, better to put herself in the mood, to slip out of bed, go into Laure's room, look for the bottle they'd opened earlier and take a large slug.

She mustn't smell of alcohol. It was important that she should be exactly as she had been that afternoon, when Mario had tiptoed over to the bed.

She rang the bell. Even the filter and the cup on the table were in the way.

'Remove that, Jules.'

'Are you going to sleep?'

'I think so.'

She tried to calm herself down, unsuccessfully. Her nerves were taut with impatience and she found it hard to lie still in bed.

Ten o'clock ... Half past ten ... People were eating at Le Trou, surrounded by the red walls with English etchings ... Jeanine, at the bar, was jiggling her big breasts as she laughed, running her hands over her hips to smooth her girdle ... The African was popping up at one door, then another, like a benevolent genie ... Laure had finished eating and was sipping her drink, watching the faces around her and taking in snatches of conversation ...

Had the doctor shamefully slipped into the toilet to give himself an injection? ... Did John have a new companion who was waiting for the moment when she would lie down on his bed while he gazed at her, his eyes bulging, a drink in his hand, sitting in his armchair, where he would eventually doze off ...?

She was afraid of missing her chance, of losing her place, because, in her mind, it was already her place. Mario was strong, slightly brutish, a little naive. From the first moment their eyes had met, he'd been intrigued.

He had driven Maria Urruti to Buenaventura to defend her against her family and she had been kidnapped under his nose. He came every day to a quiet room at the Carlton to chat with the widow of a professor from Lyon and give her, before leaving, the pleasure she needed, as Bernard needed his drug.

He probably had known other women of all kinds, but he had never yet encountered one like Betty.

Betty knew that she was all women rolled into one. He already suspected it. He had received her silent message and had responded.

Why wasn't he there yet? Was Laure detaining him? Did she have any inkling that they had arranged to meet almost in front of her?

The other evenings, he would go from table to table, and he sometimes jumped into his car to drive a customer home, an oddball in a bad way, as he'd done with the doctor.

He would find an excuse. He didn't need one. He didn't belong to Laure.

He had no idea that, because of him, Betty had just refused to return to Avenue de Wagram. By way of Lyon, true, as if on a trial basis.

And she had given Guy the task of thanking her mother-in-law!

But it wasn't generosity. Betty could even reconstitute her mother-in-law's thought process. Now that she was no longer in that atmosphere, she wasn't tempted to feel moved any more, but to rebel.

Not even that! No! At Le Trou, there was no question of rebellion. She had gone beyond that stage. There was no possibility of going back either.

It was the end of the line.

The end of the line for oddballs! Last stop before the asylum or the mortuary!

She had been mistaken in thinking that, for her, the time for the asylum or the mortuary had come. She hadn't known then that she still had Le Trou, still had Mario. She wanted to live. She was eager to live.

Anxiously, she looked at the clock, perfectly aware that it would be tonight or never. She didn't want to miss the opportunity. She dredged up a prayer.

'Oh Lord! Let him come.'

And, her body aching from impatience:

'Let him come quickly!'

She did not add:

'And let me succeed.'

If he came, she was certain she would. She desired it too much. She hungered for it too much. It was heart-breaking to be left in uncertainty and not be allowed to move.

It would be better if she didn't have to get up to open the door, she thought, all of a sudden. He had to come in by himself, thinking it was a surprise, a gift, and he should find her lying in the semi-darkness.

Barefoot, she hastily opened the door into the corridor a fraction, hoping that the bellhop on night duty or the chambermaid wouldn't close it as they walked past.

Instead of the bedside lamp, which was too bright, she lit the lamp on the dressing table, which was further away and dimmer.

Half past eleven ... She wrung her arms with nervousness ...

‘Oh Lord! Please, let him ...’

She was of a mind to make a promise, a vow, in exchange. She didn’t know what to offer and was afraid it would backfire on her.

Let her just be given this chance, the last one. Was it too much to ask as a reward for all her efforts?

She had closed her eyes. Her thoughts clanged in her head and now she howled, in a voice that came from the depths of her throat:

‘Mario!’

He was there, between the door and the bed, walking on tiptoe like earlier, and mischievously he placed a finger on his lips.

He had understood the message. He had come. He sat on the edge of the bed and, holding her shoulders with outstretched arms, he gazed at her for a long time before bending down to press his cheek to hers.

‘You came!’ she said, laughing and crying at the same time.

And, rubbing her cheek against his like an animal rubbing up against another animal:

‘You’re here!’



Someone was trying to turn the handle of the communicating door. They were trying to open it. Betty hoped that Mario couldn't hear it, because she wasn't certain enough yet.

Laure, next door, didn't insist, and the bell soon rang at the end of the corridor. She was calling the bellhop or the chambermaid. There were footsteps, a murmuring.

'Are you scared?' asked Mario, his eyes close to hers.

She hesitated, aware she was risking all she had and, trying to smile, answered:

'No.'

He clasped her more tightly to him and both stopped listening out. It was only much later that he whispered:

'I have to drop by Le Trou.'

'I'll come with you.'

'You're not allowed to. The doctor said ...'

'The doctor knows nothing about women.'

She rushed towards the chest of drawers, towards the wardrobe.

'Would you like me to wear a dress instead of my suit, for a change? You haven't seen me in a dress yet.'

She would need a drink on arrival, because she felt dizzy.

She still managed to put her clothes on very quickly and led him outside. Ignoring the lift, they went down the stairs hand in hand, as if they were stepping down from a town hall or a church.

'I have never felt so joyful in my life. And you?'

‘I am happy.’

It wasn’t yet entirely true. He must still be thinking of room 55, above them, and the forty-eight-year-old woman who found herself alone there.

‘Where do you live?’ asked Betty.

‘Above the joint. It’s a former farmhouse. The upstairs is under the eaves.’

The night concierge watched her go past in amazement.

She was alive! She had got over it! She had found a way out!

Already, she was taking ownership of the car, inhaling its smell.

‘I don’t want whisky tonight but champagne. Don’t worry, I won’t drink too much.’

The car accelerated. The concierge and the doorman exchanged glances. The bell rang on the concierge’s desk.

‘Yes, Madame Lavancher ... They have just left, yes ... They didn’t speak to me ... Sorry? ... What? ... At this hour? ... But that’s not possible ... Of course, if you wish ... Right away, Madame Lavancher ...’

His head lowered, he went to join the doorman.

‘I need you to come up with me to collect the luggage from room 55.’

‘Is she leaving?’

‘Apparently. I think I understand what’s happening. It’s that little slut she brought us a few nights ago who ...’

What was the point of explaining? The doorman too had seen them.

‘You’d better go and fetch her car.’

The receptionist emerged sleepily from the little office where he napped when things were quiet.

‘What is it?’

‘A departure. Number 55.’

‘Madame Lavancher?’

‘Yes.’

‘Should I prepare her bill?’

‘She didn’t say anything about it.’

The receptionist, embarrassed, watched the two men enter the lift and automatically began to look for the file for room 55.

They had to go up to the room twice, and outside the sound of a car boot opening and closing could be heard, then the car doors.

‘You don’t have a length of rope?’

‘There’s one in the chef’s van.’

Too bad for the chef. They'd sort it out with him in the morning.
Suitcases were strapped to the roof. Laure came down the stairs, walking a little stiffly.

'Tell Monsieur Raymond to send my bill to Lyon.'

He was the manager.

'Very good, Madame Lavancher. I hope you plan to return?'

She looked at him without replying, and shook his hand.

'Goodbye, François.'

She knew them all and called them by their first names. The long lobby was empty, lit only by a few lamps and, at the far end, behind a glazed door, the dining room was in darkness.

'Goodbye, Charles. Goodbye, Joseph.'

They were at a loss for words. She got into the car, paused to light a cigarette, and started up the engine while the porter was still reluctant to close the door.

'Are you taking the N7?'

He had the impression that, in the dark, she was smiling at him. The door slammed. Gravel crunched under the tyres of the car as it went through the gates and vanished into the night.

It was only a week later, on leafing through *Le Progrès de Lyon*, that Guy's mother learned that one of her neighbours had been found dead in her apartment. In an emotionless voice, she said to the friend who was having tea with her:

'Did you know that Madame Lavancher is dead?'

'The professor's widow?'

'She was found dead this morning, in her bed, by her cleaning woman.'

'I thought she'd left Lyon long ago. Didn't she live in Paris?'

'In Versailles, but she'd kept on her apartment here and would come back every so often.'

'What was wrong with her?'

'The newspaper doesn't say.'

'But she wasn't old.'

'Forty-nine.'

Madame Étamble remembered something. It was to Versailles that Guy had gone to have a conversation with his wife. If Betty had been in her right mind, would she not have leaped at the chance she was being offered?

It was best this way for everyone, especially for Guy, who was still young, for Antoine and for his wife too, who would no longer have felt at home in the evenings on the third floor.

‘I used to run into her from time to time. She was a tall woman, always quite pale, but I had no idea she was ill.’

How could Madame Étamble have guessed that, ultimately, Laure Lavancher had died instead of Betty?

It was one or the other.

Betty had won.



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Penguin Classics in 2021

First published in French as *Betty* by Presses de la Cité 1961

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ISBN: 978-0-141-99551-9

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